

# Struggles with Sovereignty

Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16

The Lord will make everything beautiful in its time, but in the snapshot, it sure doesn't look like it. The sovereignty of God is controversial because we have a hard time dealing with who God is in light of what we've done to this world. The Preacher paints a picture of the good life without ignoring all the dark and difficult things under the sun. Without God, there is no problem of evil. With Him, there are answers.

## The Map

The first section, 1:1-2:26, demonstrates satisfaction cannot be found from a vaporous world. Section two describes God's sovereignty over all and the joy He gives in the midst of it (3:1-5:20). Chapter 3:1-15 address the issue of time, and now Solomon handles various objections: courts are unjust (3:16-17); everyone dies (3:18-21); people are oppressed (4:1-3); others are envious (4:4-6); the problem of isolation (4:7-12); popularity is ephemeral (4:13-16). If a good God is in heaven, why are things this way? Next, he will tell us to take care (5:1-17), and then put a bow on this section: it's good to eat and drink and enjoy the good of your labor, letting joy swallow up sorrow (5:18-20).

## Injustice

Many believers stick to pious platitudes, ignoring what is going on. Solomon lives with eyes wide open, and when he looks at the places of justice, he sees injustice (v. 16). How is it that the just judge is in heaven while wickedness rules on our benches, police departments, churches, schools, and so on? In the place of righteousness, there's iniquity (v. 16). Whether we're talking about our state Supreme Court ruling 7-2 that capital gain tax is not an income tax, or someone on the US Supreme Court leaking the Dobbs decision to pressure justices and led to an assassination attempt, injustice prevails. "Words and laws don't matter," we say, "we'll do what we want because what we want is justice." You would think pastors would fear God, listen to both sides before forming an opinion, and counsel courageously, but you'd be wrong (Prov. 18:17, 13). Solomon judges justly and knows good priests too, lest we become too cynical, but the problem is plain. Yet He doesn't despair: "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" (v. 17). The last judgment is repeatedly acknowledged in the book of Ecclesiastes (12:14), and it's not just the answer for the existence of injustice, but the means of reducing it (Ex. 18:21). Men who fear the final judgment know that it's a bad play to take bribes now. Ultimately, nobody gets away with anything. If justice actually matters, you need an ultimate judge.

## Death

He moves from injustice to consider death, that man dies like an animal. Your body wears out and stops just like any critter on the earth. Looking only with your eyes, what's the difference between you and that squirrel you drove by on the way to church? God gives you this test, and only faith in the living God can pass it (v. 18). Life is vapor, and just like an animal wants to avoid the predator or the moving car, we try but end up in the same place, dust to dust (vv. 19-20). The genius of man doesn't prevent him from rotting in the ground like any other creature. All people know that man is different than the animals, especially those who deny it. They're the ones busy worrying that the weather is getting colder, I mean hotter, I mean just changing, and you have the responsibility to take care of it. "There is no God, so save the whales" is a perfect *non sequitur*. But only an outside authority could task us with whale-love. God knows our spirits go upward and animal spirits down to the earth; looking from our perspective apart from the gift of God, we

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cannot know this (v. 21). You don't know when you will die, so don't wait for the next phase of life. Be sure to rejoice where God has you, the work He has given you, your lot in life, *now*, right now, as in today (v. 22).

## Oppression

When authority is used to burden, inflict cruelty, and do injustice we call it oppression. People also feel oppressed by the effects of sin in marriage, families, relationships, businesses, in the courts, in failing health, almost anywhere you look, there it is under the sun (4:1). When suffering this way, it's common to rather die than live (cf. 1 Kgs. 19:4; Jon. 4:3; Job 3:3-10). Just because you have elected representatives does not mean oppression is eliminated. H.L. Mencken said democracy is two coyotes and a sheep deciding what to have for lunch. From this vantage point of the oppressed looking no further than the earth, it's better to be dead than living or even to never have existed (vv. 2-3). For those who trust God, joy comes in the morning and He is our help and deliverer (Ps. 30:5; Job 19:26). "Your love," David sings, "is better than life" (Ps. 63:3).

## Envy

Next, Solomon sees that the skilled and productive are envied by their neighbor (v. 4). Some through industry make things, put others to work, create wealth, and bless people, and as a result the envious try to tear it apart. This is a self-devouring vice; those who try to tear down others pull the roof in on themselves (v. 5). The problem with socialism, Margaret Thatcher noted, is that eventually you run out of other people's money. We are becoming a systemically envious culture whenever we require equality of outcome instead of equality of opportunity. It's better to have just a handful and be at peace than to have a pile and be grasping for the wind (v. 6; cf. 1 Tim. 6:6; Prov. 15:17, 16:8). Repentance from envy is contentment not only in what God has given you, but joy in what He has given others.

## Isolation

The Preacher sees the evil of one working endlessly with no one to share with (v. 8). His eye is not satisfied, so he keeps accumulating, never stopping to consider, "Why?" He is isolated and lonely and yet can't get off the treadmill for fear he'll miss out on more money. People chasing dollars always think eventually they'll stop to focus on what matters. By that time, they don't want to. But God made us to be together both to enjoy and help one another (vv. 9-10). Community brings warmth, protection, and strength (vv. 11-12).

## Momentary Popularity

The final objection recognizes a humble but wise young man is better than a stubborn old king, yet who remembers him (v. 13)? He will rise and take the throne, rule over all the living, and yet be taken for granted and forgotten. Such vapor and shepherding the wind (vv. 14-16)! It's sad how people treat one another, but the gift of God is irrevocable, signed and sealed by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 11:29; 2 Cor. 1:22). This gift results in real friendship, fellowship, community, and love (Heb. 10:25; Jms. 1:27). To answer all of these complaints and objections, Christ gives us Himself. Though sinless, He suffered and overcame it all. He is Lord, we are not. Deal with it.