

The Wisdom Literature

Lesson #18

Ecclesiastes 3:1-5:20

Outline

I. **Understanding The Plan Of God (3:1-5:20)**

- A. The principle of God's plan (3:1-15).
- B. The facts of God's plan (3:16-4:16).
- C. The implications of God's plan (5:1-17).
- D. Conclusion (5:18-20).

Notes

Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

- God orders time (3:1-8).
 - For all the affairs of life, God has set a time, or the beginning of a period. The length of time and the particular events along that time are each ordained in the providence of God. To illustrate this broad and comforting assertion, the writer turns to fourteen pairs of opposites in vss. 2-8. Twenty-eight times, "time" is repeated as he presses home the point of God's foreordination and man's accountability. "Season" means "a fixed, definite portion of time."
 - The plan of God encompasses everything from our being born to the day of our death. God appoints both our birthday and the day of our funeral. Thus the entirety of human existence begins the list of fourteen illustrations of the comprehensiveness of the plan of God. He is in control of all the affairs of life in the sense that everything revolves around His laws. Birth and death are the bookends.
- Eternity is within the heart (3:9-15).
 - After explaining the fact that God has a plan which encompasses man's life, the writer then returns to ponder the question first introduced in 1:3.
 - The answer is clear: All of life unfolds under the appointment of God's providence (birth, death, growth, harvest; joys, sorrows; acquiring, losing; speaking up, being silent; war and peace). Since everything has its time from God, all the labor of man by itself cannot change the times, circumstances, or control of events.
 - God has made all the events and relationships in life "beautiful." In addition to the beauty of this order, He has also implanted in the hearts of men a desire to know how this plan of God makes all the details fit together. All I can ultimately know is what God has revealed.

- Man has an inborn inquisitiveness and capacity to learn how everything in his experience can be integrated to make a whole. He wants to know how the mundane realm of ordinary, day-to-day living fits with the spiritual realm hereafter; how the business of living, eating, working, and enjoying can be made to fit with the call to worship, serve, and love the living God.
- However, in all the vastness and confusion, man is frustrated by the “vanity” of selecting any one of the many facets of God’s “good” world as that part of life to which he will totally give himself. Life will remain an enigma and a frustration until men come to “fear,” that is, to believe in the God who made man and the goods and truths of this world.
- Ecclesiastes 1:9 was designed to show the monotony of life without God and 3:16 shows the orderly and appointed succession of events under the providence of God.
- God “seeks” time itself, which from a human point of view has been lost, but which in God’s wise arrangement of events becomes available for God to bring forward as a part of His wise plan or as a witness at the last judgment. God can call back the past and connect it with the future.

Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16

- Man has no justice (3:16-17).
 - God instituted human tribunals as places where men could expect to find judicial relief.
 - When wickedness is offered where justice should be found, that is a matter of utmost seriousness.
 - Such inequities God Himself will rectify in the future judgment, although they appear temporarily to run unabated.
- Man has no hope (3:18-22).
 - Chance rules man and beast. Death ultimately catches up with all men. But there is the seeming unfairness of it all. Death is the great leveler of all living beings; it happens to men as it happens to beasts.
 - Yet by this very same fact, God shows men their frailty in an effort to force them to turn back and search for Him, to come to the realization that all gifts are from His hand, to receive from His hand the ability to enjoy those gifts and to come to appreciate His plan.
 - Tragically, we seldom take heart as we ought to the reality of death. We should set our hearts on what is above (Colossians 3:1-2). We are more primitive in our estimate of and regard for the life hereafter than were the men of antiquity. We are insulated from directly facing the grim aspects of death day in and day out; it was not so with them. They had no gadgetry to occupy their minds, no gracious living

to cause them to forget, no hospitals and rest homes to remove the smell, sound, and sight of death from them.

- Man has no comfort (4:1-3).
 - Solomon showed tender affection toward the oppressed. A tremendous list of possible injuries can be done to a person, their property, or a person's good name by rulers, masters, fathers, husbands, or others in positions of responsibility. The lot of the oppressed often is the absence of any "comforter."
 - Job was so affected by oppression that he desired to be dead rather than live an oppressed life (Job 3:3-10).
- Man has no rest (4:4-6).
 - Often the rule of the business world is the law of the jungle. We want to stand above the crowd, but every success is greeted with envy instead of the expected praise. Every skill is received as Cain greeted Abel's goodness, or as Saul failed to rejoice for David's sake.
 - One must be cautious not to just forget it all. In fact, Solomon warns against this kind of attitude which could be an excuse for laziness. Instead of cruel competitiveness, Solomon recommends moderation.
 - It is better to be content with less and enjoy it than to strive all the time to support and maintain a fortune. Do not struggle so hard to fill both fists with luxuries you do not really need.
- Man has no companionship (4:7-12).
 - Money will not give you warmth and companionship (cf. Matthew 13:22; Mark 4:19). Rather than resolving problems, money becomes the problem.
 - Escape from competition may be a temporary solution, but then one has to cope with loneliness. This is a situation where no family is left, not even an heir for whom one could work and deprive himself of pleasure.
 - Society, not the solitary life, and marriage, not the celibate life, are to be preferred. For in such intimacy and shared life there is assistance, comfort, and defense.
- Man has no security (4:13-16).
 - The popularity given to men is certainly fleeting and temporary. People are fickle. Today's hero is tomorrow's bum.
 - While rulers tremble and diligently seek to make their thrones secure, the people clamor for change and revolution. When the old ruler is tossed out because of public opinion, the new ruler comes along, oblivious that he will ultimately meet his predecessor's fate. There is no satisfaction in leadership, power, and influence.

Ecclesiastes 5:1-17

- Do not rob the Lord (5:1-7).
 - Solomon now goes on to warn that the six preceding facts should not be used to adopt an irreligious stance concerning life. Some would be tempted by the above facts to a practical atheism; that is, being tempted to act as if God is not in control.
 - We should go into the house of God with a receptive attitude and a readiness to listen rather than lecture God on what He ought to do. Man and God are clearly not equal and we should not negate our worship with hasty and foolish words. None of us deserve to be heard by God. We are heard because of God's grace.
 - When vows are made to God, they must be carried out (Numbers 30:2). Ananias and Sapphira lied and experienced the judgment of God (Acts 5:1-11). It would have been better had they never vowed at all, or if they had promised only a part of their land; but they had decided to toy with God in hopes of gaining greater esteem among members of the early church.
 - We must watch our mouths when we contemplate the obstacles to faith and enigmas that life produces. Men must learn that their first order of business is to fear God. True piety is the only remedy for every temptation offered to us to spew out empty words against God's good operation of the affairs of this life. Man must begin as a Christian if he is to ever enjoy living as God intended him to live.
- Do not rob others (5:8-9).
 - If one sees oppression in the land, do not be surprised. The highest judge of all is the One who will evaluate every judgment ever made (Romans 13:1-7). So if man fails to carry out justice, God will not fail.
 - Good government by a delegated officer is a great blessing to any country. This is one source of correction of some of the abuses witnessed by men. A few dishonest people may benefit from corrupt and oppressive practices, but everyone benefits from organized government.
- Do not rob yourself (5:10-17).
 - Human desire outruns acquisitions, no matter how large the acquisitions may be. The more man has, the more he wants.
 - An increase in wealth demands a corresponding increase in staff to manage it. Wealth seems to attract all sorts of relatives and parasites.
 - Labor may bring sleep, but wealth brings sleeplessness and the fear that a blunder may result in the loss of everything. A man of moderation works hard, earns a paycheck, and goes to sleep at night.

- Possession is so uncertain and so brief, for often by some accident or speculation the hoarded riches dwindle to nothing.
- The wealthy man must return to his Maker devoid of all his riches, not even having a cloak. Nevertheless, there are still men who will spend all their days in great sorrow and distressing labor for such an empty goal as this.

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

- God's proposed course of living is "good;" that is, without moral problems. God's plan can also be declared to be a beautiful path to tread. It possesses aesthetic and practical qualities, along with its moral perfections.
- Enjoyment, not worldly accumulations, is the principle end to be sought. Therefore, neither the plan of God nor religion was ever meant to stifle our pleasure and joy in possessions or in life itself (1 Timothy 6:8).
- The man who has learned the secret of enjoyment as a gift from God will not become anxious over the length of his life. He has too much joy in living to brood over the impermanence of his mortal being. Rather, each day is taken as it comes, as a gift from God. Real satisfaction is not based upon what one has accumulated, but rather upon taking advantage of the blessings God has given today.
- God "answers" or makes His being correspond to the joy in man's heart. Men are thereby kept occupied and delighted in the inner recesses of their lives with God Himself. Consequently, the dark side of man's brief life is relieved and exchanged for gladness in the plan of God.