

“Six Feet and No More” (Ecclesiastes 3:16–4:6)(2.5.23)

Ecclesiastes 3:16–4:6 (NIV84)

¹⁶ And I saw something else under the sun:

In the place of judgment—wickedness was there,
in the place of justice—wickedness was there. w

¹⁷ I thought in my heart,

“God will bring to judgment

both the righteous and the wicked,

for there will be a time for every activity,

a time for every deed.”

¹⁸ I also thought, “As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. ¹⁹ Man’s fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal.

Everything is meaningless. ²⁰ All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. ²¹ Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?”

²² So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?

Oppression, Toil, Friendlessness

4 Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:

I saw the tears of the oppressed—
and they have no comforter;
power was on the side of their oppressors—
and they have no comforter.

² And I declared that the dead,
who had already died,
are happier than the living,
who are still alive.

³ But better than both
is he who has not yet been,
who has not seen the evil
that is done under the sun.

⁴ And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

⁵ The fool folds his hands
and ruins himself.

⁶ Better one handful with tranquility
than two handfuls with toil
and chasing after the wind.

THE WORD OF GOD FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD

LET US PRAY

“Six Feet and No More”

INTRODUCTION:

Russian legend has it that there once was a man who lived in dire poverty. One day he heard of a faraway place that would change his life forever—a place of land, food, and wealth.

He found the leader of these generous people.

“Welcome,” said the leader. “All that you see is yours.” The poor man could not believe his ears or eyes, for what he saw was greater than he ever could have imagined.

“How might I acquire a piece of land for myself?” the man asked.

“Tomorrow,” he said, “when the sun comes up, you will be given four sharp sticks. From a prescribed starting point you may walk or run and stake out the territory for your new home. The only condition is that you must return to that same starting point before the sun falls below the opposite horizon. If you do not, then you gain nothing.”

The next day the poor man walked and ran and dreamed and planned all day, planting the first three stakes miles apart. When he noticed the sun setting, he began to hurry, racing the sun, but his greed prevented him from winning the race. Exhausted to death, he was buried the next morning.

When the leader asked his people, "How much land does a man need?" They replied wisely, "Six feet ... and no more."

BODY:

Why wickedness? Why Evil? Why oppression? Each one of us have had similar questions. We try to make sense of what is going on in our world. As we approach the one year anniversary, how could Russia invade the Ukraine and continue that war today? We try to make sense of what is going on in our nation. How could those who have vowed to serve and protect commit murder? We try to make sense of what is going on in Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church. How could those who proclaim to be ordained by God deny the truth of God's holy inspired word?

I remind you that Qoheleth, our preacher and teacher, is in the midst of a long investigation. He has gathered a congregation, most likely young men embarking upon life, with the purpose of discovering direction. Our tendency is to focus only on portions of this book of Ecclesiastes, but we must intentionally keep in mind that Qoheleth is wrestling with the issues. Sometimes, one thought appears to be dominant only to later be reversed.

Our task of understanding is made more difficult because the chapter breaks, which were not in the original text, don't happen in a clear and definite way. That happens in other books of the Bible too, but in this book it seems a stronger struggle than in others. There is also a fair

amount of repetition. But once again, in a wrestling match that often happens too. The positions are repeated as each grappler attempts to seek an advantage and gain a superior position.

In today's scripture, and on two previous occasions, Qoheleth states that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work or toil. In those two previous occasions this truth is conjoined to enjoying our eating and drinking. Eating and drinking are terms that convey daily living. And the reason we should enjoy these three things, work, eating, and drinking, is because they are gifts of God.

Now, I will give you Qoheleth's summation to the questions: Why wickedness? Why oppression? Why Evil? Immediately after despairing about the prominence of evil, we have Ecclesiastes 4:4 (NIV84). "And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from **man's envy of his neighbor**. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. He is not alone in this assessment."

Let us start with the 10th Commandment. 20:17 (NIV84)
"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." Scripture teaches that evil is the outcome of envy.

Proverbs 27:4 (KJV 1900) Wrath *is* cruel, and anger *is* outrageous; But who *is* able to stand before envy?

Leviticus 6:2–5 (NIV84)

² “If anyone sins and is unfaithful to the Lord by deceiving his neighbor about something entrusted to him or left in his care or stolen, or if he cheats him, ³ or if he finds lost property and lies about it, or if he swears falsely, or if he commits any such sin that people may do— ⁴ when he thus sins and becomes guilty, he must return what he has stolen or taken by extortion, or what was entrusted to him, or the lost property he found, ⁵ or whatever it was he swore falsely about. He must make restitution in full, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the owner on the day he presents his guilt offering.

James 4:2 (NIV84) You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight.

Every institution we have is made up of people. When your bricks are flawed and brittle, the whole structure is compromised. That is why even the places we would expect to be the best and most righteous are not: government, the judicial system, and church. Then there is something about the anonymity of a group that leads to behavior that would not happen otherwise. Think of the terms mob mentality and groupthink.

In contrast to envy and coveting I offer these scriptures:

Jesus warns in the Gospel of Luke 12:15 (NIV84)

¹⁵ ... “**Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.**”

Paul says to Timothy, 1 Timothy 6:6–8 (NIV84) ⁶But godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷ For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.

Paul in Romans 13:9 (NIV84) The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”**

Depending on whether King Solomon is the author of Ecclesiastes or it was authored from his viewpoint five hundred years later, the book is over 2,500 years old. This shows that human nature has not changed. On almost every day of the week, the nightly news will testify to that fact.

Now, I am going to speak about the death of Tyre Nichols at the hands of five members of the Memphis special task force called the SCORPION unit. I do so with some trepidation because like so many current events, the issues are much more complicated than headlines and soundbites. Also, often there is information in current events that does not come to light until later.

Memphis has a very high crime rate; not only property crime, but prostitution, drugs, and violence too. In many large cities across the nation, special police units, task forces, are created to cope with the most dangerous and crime infested neighborhoods. There is a high level of

fear on the part of the citizens. Surely, the police have some level of fear too.

There are many dynamics at play. What happens on the streets, on the front lines of this battle, most of us only know about from movies; or, after-the-fact news reports when tragedies occur. What seems clear, is that these task forces have been allowed freedoms to increase effectiveness without proper accountability. When so-called basic human instincts take over, what is left is a volatile concoction ready to explode into violence.

When this happens, we are like the animals, the beasts. That is what Qoheleth tells us here immediately after his lament about wickedness, even wickedness in the courts. Men breathe. Animals breathe. Men return to dust. Animals return to dust.

Yes, justice is often perverted. On rare occasions, a judge may be bribed. Sometimes a judge might have an agenda that they might feel is more important than upholding a particular law. We all know that having a better lawyer can be the deciding factor. And, you get the better lawyer because you have more wealth. Large corporations, think tobacco or chemical companies, have often pursued profits with impunity in the court system.

Justice is sometimes perverted because the law is perverted or unjust. Sometimes members of a jury allow personal prejudices to decide their vote. Sometimes a jury is tampered with. Gangs or organized crime have often intimidated witnesses with threats of violence or murder.

Where do we get our indignation against oppression, wickedness, injustice, and evil? It is the moral compass that comes from God. It gives evidence of God, for without God – perfectly holy and just – to what would our moral compass point? And without a moral compass, we are mere animals.

I have shared this idea with you before. Cold is the lack of heat. Dark is the absence of light. Evil is the absence of God. It is a fact of existence that a vacuum must be filled. The only way a vacuum can be sustained is in a completely sealed environment. We do not and cannot live in a completely sealed environment. Therefore, we must have God in our lives. Otherwise, we will be living in a cold dark world where only evil abounds.

What does Qoheleth argue here? It is better to be dead than alive. Better yet is to have never been born. Why? Because seeing evil prosper is so loathsome. This is so pessimistic, but remember his perspective is from under the sun; not the Son – S, O, N.

Qoheleth laments that in this life, in the place of righteous judgement we have wickedness. He doesn't know where or when, but at some point God will judge every deed. He has a sense that there is an afterlife evidenced in the question - Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward? And if there is no afterlife, then again, we share the fate of the animals.

The last two verses of today's scripture offer three options for living – how to use our hands. The folded hands belong to the lazy person. Our NIV translation

states this brings ruin upon that person. Other translations are more graphic – the folded handed fool eats or consumes their own flesh.

In contrast we have the person that has one handful of tranquility, quietness, or rest. This person finds contentment in what they have. Paul echoes this thought in Philippians 4:11–12 (NIV84)

¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

Yes, Qoheleth says that continuous striving, trying keep two handfuls, will never bring satisfaction. It is chasing after the wind and brings vexation of spirit.

CONCLUSION:

When Qoheleth saw the tears of the oppressed and powerless, he twice stated they have NO comforter. My friends, the Church of Jesus Christ is to be that comforter. In the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus tells us, Matthew 25:34–36, 40 (NIV84)

³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me

in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' ⁴⁰ ... 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

2 Corinthians 1:3–5 (NIV84) *The God of All Comfort*

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our troubles, **so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.** ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

Let us now prepare our hearts to go to the table of the God of all comfort.

AMEN & AMEN. LET US PRAY.