



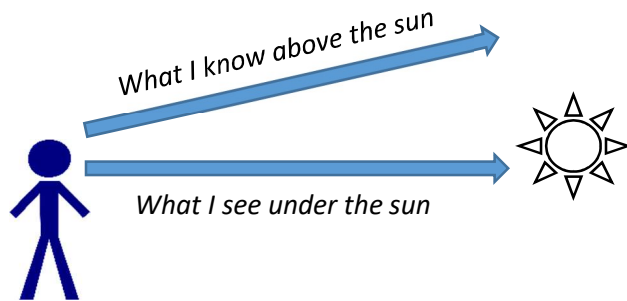
Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16

LIVING IN A MESSED UP WORLD

One could object that it is not worthy of God to wield the sword [in judgment]. Is God not love, longsuffering, and all-powerful love? A counter-question could go something like this: Is it not a bit too arrogant to presume that our contemporary sensibilities about what is compatible with God's love are so much healthier that those of the people of God throughout the whole history of Judaism and Christianity? ...One could further argue that in a world of violence it would not be worthy of God **not to wield** the sword; if God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make the final end to violence, God would not be worthy of our worship. ...I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone. Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. ...Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die. And as one watches it die, one will do well to reflect about many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.

—Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*

The Two Perspectives of Life in Ecclesiastes:



In 3:1-15, the Teacher affirms what he knows to be true, *above the sun*, through God's revelation—God is sovereign and good and He has made everything beautiful in its time. But now in 3:16-4:16, he turns once again to what he sees *under the sun* (cf. "I saw," 3:16, 4:1, 4:4, 4:7, 4:15).

1. He saw a messed up _____ (3:16-22).

- The one place where justice should be seen *under the sun* is often the place of the greatest injustice when the guilty go free and the innocent are convicted (cf. Prov. 17:15).
- God will ultimately set all things right (cf. Rev. 20:11-15).
- God tests and humbles us through the reality of death.

When pain and suffering are conjoined with the monstrous mystery of evil, we come to a crossroads from which there is no turning back. The tsunami of high school killings...the rampage of a serial killer...the horror of the mother who suffocated all eight of her children...the mass graves of slaughtered Albanians in Kosovo—the list of evil incidents goes on and on. ...Pain, suffering, and evil constitute a watershed for the community of faith.

—Brennan Manning

The renewal of creation follows the final judgment. The present world...will be cleansed of sin and re-created, reborn, renewed, made whole. —Herman Bavinck

Eccl. 3:20, showing us man on his journey from dust to dust, as in Genesis 3:19, confronts us with the Fall, and with the irony that we die like cattle because we fancied ourselves as gods.

—Derek Kidner

2. He saw messed up _____ (4:1-3).

- Oppression occurs when the willfully sinful gain power and use their power to harm, subjugate, kill, and crush others.
- Seeing the tears and the seeming hopelessness of the oppressed causes the Teacher to conclude, from his own perspective, that they would be better off being dead or having never been born.

3. He saw a messed up _____ (4:4-8).

- Selfish ambition, greed, and competition often drive our work.
- Laziness (not working) is self-destructive but overworking because of selfish ambition and greed is also destructive.
- Honest work and contentment are best (cf. Prov. 15:16-17).

4. He saw a messed up _____ (4:13-16).

- The Teacher tells a parable (or perhaps a true story) of an old, foolish king who is replaced with a young, wise leader who was born in poverty and even held captive for his beliefs. The young leader is loved and followed by everyone in the land but soon the next generation arises and they want someone else.
- The political world suffers both from old, foolish leaders and from fickle people who are always looking for the next messiah.

HOW DO YOU LIVE IN A MESSED UP WORLD?

- Trust that God will make all things right in the end (3:17).
- Rejoice in the work that God has given you to do (3:22).
- Learn to be content (4:6; cf. Phil. 4:11-13).
- **Make your relationships a priority!** (4:9-12)

Our journey through this life is difficult and dangerous. Thus, we need someone with us to help make our journey more successful, help us up when we fall, give us comfort and warmth, and provide greater strength and protection from potential attacks.

The best thing you can do in a messed up world is to focus each day on strengthening your relationships with others and strengthening your relationship with Jesus Christ (i.e., *a threefold cord*).

Fold his hands (4:5). An aversion to work (cf. Prov. 6:10, 24:33).

His idleness [4:5] eats away not only what he has but what he is: eroding his self-control, his grasp of reality, his capacity for care, and, in the end, his self-respect.
—Derek Kidner

When a man comes to die, no matter what his talents and influence and genius, if he dies unloved his life must be a failure to him and his dying a cold horror.
—John Steinbeck (1902-68)

To be unhappy at home is the ultimate result of all ambition.
—Samuel Johnson (1709-84)

This concluding verse is a comment on the disenchantment of political power. Political regimes succeed one another, and each ruler may attain to the throne on a wave of popular enthusiasm; but as the reign wears on those who come later will become disillusioned and find little cause for rejoicing. —R. N. Whybray

The most natural setting here [4:9-12] is that of a journey. Roads outside cities and towns were often hazardous and the isolated traveler would be particularly vulnerable to attack.
—Craig G. Bartholomew

If I had to do it all over, I would make more friends. —Ty Cobb

It is not wealth, education, youth, or good weather that makes a person happy. It is relationships! Word needs to be spread. It is important to work on social skills, close interpersonal ties and social support in order to be happy.
—Dr. Edward Diener