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UNDERSTANDING THE ALL-ENCOMPASSING PLAN OF GOD

ECCLESIASTES 3:1–5:20

Solomon's personal experience as king, and the restlessness of nature itself, laid the groundwork for the inescapable conclusion that if enjoyment and happiness were ever going to be within anyone's reach, they would need to come as direct gifts from God to persons of faith—so Solomon taught by divine revelation. The wicked, meanwhile, were left with the aggravating and empty task of accumulating goods that could soon be converted to other uses by those fearing God as the wicked yielded those things up at their death. The contrast and difference in the outcome of each is very explicit in this memorable section of Ecclesiastes.

Thus, in the next step in his fourfold argument in this book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon boldly argued the thesis that every action of an individual can be traced to its ultimate source, which is an all-embracing plan that is administered by God (3:1). This is a beautiful plan, yet men and women do not and, as a matter of fact, cannot apprehend it because of their

prevailing worldliness. So vast, so eternal, and so comprehensive in its inclusions is this plan that mortals are both threatened and exasperated in their attempts to discover it for themselves. Nevertheless, being built by God, and being made in God's own image, each person possesses a hunger within his or her heart to know the vastness, wholeness, and key details of this plan. Yet it cannot be known until one comes to personally know the living God (3:11). Therefore, each is once again cut off from the very substance for which his or her whole being yearns, just as each likewise searched for happiness and joy in chapters 1 and 2. There must be a divine plan behind all of this! 🍷

VIEWING THE CALL FOR US TO UNDERSTAND THE ALL-
ENCOMPASSING PLAN OF GOD FROM THE CONCLUSION OF
THE SECTION—[ECCLESIASTES 5:18-20](#) (HEBREW 17-19)

¹⁸(17H) Look! Here is what I realized: it is good and beautiful/fitting for one to eat, to drink, and to see goodness in all his toil which he has done under the sun during the days God has given him; for this is his reward.

¹⁹(18H) Furthermore, when God gives any person wealth and riches, and empowers him to enjoy them, and to accept them as his portion and to rejoice in his toil; this is a gift of God.

²⁰(19H) For he will not long brood over the days of his life,

for God will keep him busy [or continuously answers] with [through] the joy in his heart.

W. Sibley Towner commented that:

These next verses [5:18-20], in contrast, bring the passage to a close with a reprise (see 2:24-26) of the only consistently positive theme of the book: that the proper goal of all human endeavor is joy. A good life of enjoyment of the fruits of human labor is possible if people will simply look on food, drink, and money as gifts from God and accept their 'lot' [(*heleq*) v. 18; cf. 2:10, 'reward'; 3:22)].¹

Therefore, as we did with the first section of chapters one and two, it will be best to begin our investigation of chapters three to five with the writer's conclusion to the section as we attempt to assess the development of the principle that God has an all-embracing plan that covers all persons, times, and actions. Thus we propose to judge the whole section of 3:1-5:17 in light of its intended goal in 5:18-20. The following list is a fair appraisal of the writer's conclusion to the second part of his work.

- God's proposed course of living is "good," that is, without moral problems (v. 18a).
- God's plan can also be declared to be an "appropriate," "beautiful," or "fitting" path to tread. It possesses aesthetic and practical qualities, along with its moral perfections (v. 18b).
- Enjoyment, not worldly accumulations, is the principal

end to be sought. Therefore, neither the plan of God nor religion was ever meant to stifle our pleasure and joy in possessing things or our joy in life itself (v. 18c).

- In fact, 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 (vv. 18d-19).²
- God himself “answers,” or “keeps one occupied” (v. 20b), that is, makes his being to correspond to the joy in one’s heart. People 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.

Thus we arrive at a similar conclusion to that given in [2:24-26](#), with the addition that the scheme, or the plan, of life itself is not monotonous or dreary, because it too is in the hands of God. Why then should a person “brood, sulk,” or even curse any aspect of God’s gift of life, or his promised ability to enjoy everything, no matter how trivial, mundane, or ephemeral in comparison to himself? But let us turn now to the development of the argument.

The structure of this section ([3:1-5:17](#)) is more easily described than the previous section of the book, for it moves from the famous poem on appropriate times for everything

(3:1-8) to a discussion on God's purposes for life (3:9-15). Surely, this states the general principle of our section, viz., that God does have a plan and that it does embrace every person, in all actions, and in all times of life.

But if that is true, then what are we to say about the anomalies and apparent contradictions to this thesis? Six cases are raised by the Teacher, usually introduced by the rhetorical formula:

“And still I saw...” (3:16),

“Also I thought to myself” [or “I said in my heart”] (3:18),

“I looked again and I saw” [or “Again I turned and saw...”] (4:1),

“[And] I saw” (4:4),

“I looked again and I saw” [or “Again I turned and I saw”] (4:7),

with only 4:13 being without an introductory formula similar to the other five. And what was it that the Teacher saw, which he thought somewhat disrupted his principle that God's plan was all-embracing? The things that seemed to be spoiling the beauty of God's plan were:

1. 3:16-17 The courts were unjust
2. 3:18-21 Death came to all
3. 4:1-3 People were being oppressed
4. 4:4-6 People were being envious
5. 4:7-12 People were often isolated

6. 4:13-16 Popularity was temporary

If these mitigating “facts” intruded on the success of the plan of God, what implications did the acknowledgement of these anomalies have by way of cautions and warnings for those who feared God and believed that God did have a plan after all? Qoheleth’s warning seemed to be that men and women should be careful not to make a hasty miscalculation about all of these anomalies, or apparent contradictions, so that they ended up denying the reality and the existence of God’s providence, assuming instead that God Himself did not have a plan that embraced all of reality.

The structure for this second section of the book of Ecclesiastes, then, will be:

- A. 3:1-15—The Principle: God’s Plan Embraces All of Our Reality
- B. 3:16–4:16—The Facts: Anomalies Must Not Be Used by Us to Deny God’s Plan
- C. 5:1-17—The Implications: Certain Warnings and Cautions to Us are in Order
- D. 5:18-20—Conclusion

A. 3:1-15—THE PRINCIPLE: GOD’S PLAN EMBRACES ALL OF OUR REALITY

¹For everything there is a season,
a time for every matter under heaven:

²a time to give birth, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to uproot what was
planted;

³a time to kill and a time to heal;
a time to tear down and a time to build;

⁴a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to skip about;

⁵a time to scatter stones, and a time to gather stones;
a time to embrace, and a time to abstain from
embracing;

⁶a time to search, and a time to give up;
a time to keep and a time to throw away;

⁷a time to rend, and a time to stitch together;
a time to be silent and a time to speak;

⁸a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time of war, and a time of peace.

⁹What gain do the workers have for their toil?

¹⁰I have seen the business that God has given to the sons of
the men to be occupied with.

¹¹He has made everything beautiful in its time. Moreover he
has also set eternity in their hearts, from which a person is
not able to find the work God has done from the beginning
to the end.

¹²I recognized that there is nothing good in them except to
rejoice and to do good while they live.

¹³And also that every person should eat and drink and real-

ize good in all his toil; it is the gift of God.

¹⁴I know that everything that God does will be forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing can be diminished; God does it so that they should fear [be in awe before] him.

¹⁵What is has already been; that which is to be has already been; God seeks what is pursued.

The poem of [3:1-8](#) may be one of the best-known portions of the Bible to many who often know very little of the rest of the Bible, but it is also at the same time one of the least understood passages. The Teacher's intention here is not directly to make prescriptions for life, but mainly to offer pronouncements on the fact that from the perspective of God, it is He who orders all aspects of a person's life and actions. Even when there is sickness, death, war, and the like, God is in charge of the seasons and times of life. 🌿 This does not mean God is willing to let a person's life fall into chaos, for He also makes sure there are times for giving birth, healing, and peace as well.

Life is not one of chance or fate, for despite the haphazard *appearance* of things, God alone is in charge of nature and history. 🌿 The only persons who would be upset by this are secularists who wish to be their own god over all things.

Michael Kelley noted that

The precise quality of man's rebellion lies in his supreme aspiration to make nature and history serve and glorify man

☛ . To accomplish that goal he must have the absolute lordship of time and its content.³

Kelley went on to quote from Rousas Rushdoony to the same effect:

In ancient paganism...humanistic man sought to govern time by means of rites whose purpose was to control time and nature. In fertility and chaos cults, men believed they could make nature fruitful again, wipe out past history and sins, reverse time and order, and generate themselves, nature, and history.⁴

Moderns are, more often than not, no less optimistic about reaching the same goals—and doing it all, but deliberately apart or separate from God!

However, for all the affairs of life, argued Qoheleth, God has set a time, i.e., the length of time (“a season”) for everything, v. 1, and the particular events ☛ (“a time” for this and “a time” for that) along that time band or “season” where each event is established and ordained in the providence of God. Our times are in God’s hands (Ps. 31:15); therefore, what those who fear God must do is to “redeem the time” (Eph. 5:15), for God has made everything “beautiful in its time” (Eccles. 3:11). ☛

To illustrate this broad and comforting assertion, the writer turns to fourteen pairs of opposites in verses 2-8. Twenty-eight times, “time” is repeated as he presses home the point

of God's foreordination and man's accountability.

Some (e.g., Leupold)⁵ have attempted to interpret these pairs of contrasting events as if they were intended to signify, in an allegorical or spiritualizing way, the church or the nations. The result is a travesty of the meaning intended by the author. It simply cannot be shown that Qoheleth meant by the idea of giving birth to signify moral regeneration; by death, the death of the old, sinful nature of man; by planting, the spiritual implantation of truth in the heart; by uprooting, the destruction of the sin principle in the heart of man; by killing, the mortification of sin; by healing, the recovery from sin; and so on. Nor was the writer limiting or directing his remarks to the birth and death of nations *per se*. (Compare, however, in a different context, [Jeremiah 1:10](#) for the pairs to “plant, uproot” and “build, tear down.”)

The references in verses [2-8](#) are basically to individuals. The plan of God encompassed everything in the lives of human beings from the day of our being born to the day of our death. God appointed both our birthday and the day of our funeral. Thus the entirety of human existence encompasses the list of fourteen illustrations of the comprehensiveness of the plan of God. 🖊

Next, Qoheleth moves to the vegetable realm and teaches us that even the life of vegetables is set in the scope of God's plan—when they are to be planted and when they are to be

uprooted (v. 2). (It may be noted in passing that this pair is also used later in [Jeremiah 18:7](#) and [Zephaniah 2:4](#), among other references, to apply metaphorically to nations.)

Having established that the term of life is fixed for persons as well as for the plant world, Solomon teaches that even those situations that seem to be in the hands of mortals and, therefore, somewhat unpredictable—such as the condemnation of murderers by the state to the penalty of death—are likewise embraced in the plan of God. There is a time for executing murderers or destroying enemies in a just war (v. 3).

Incidentally, such action against murderers is favored in Scripture, not because men and women are sovereign or because society and the bereaved victims are somehow benefited, but because persons are so vastly important to God—they are made in the image of God [[Gen. 9:6](#)].) To kill another person with malice and by deliberately lying in wait to do so (first-degree murder) is to kill God in effigy. Thus, when guilt can be demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt, the only alternative that the state, God's duly authorized agent in such a case, has is to show respect for God and for the value of the image of God in man by taking the murderer's life. Such a moral reason (i.e., people are made in the image of God) has not been antiquated by any subsequent revelation in the gospel. And how could it be antiquated? Can the character of God be offered at discount

value in generations to come?

Along with taking life in those designated times, the plan of God includes a time “to heal,” or, literally, “to sew,” “to heal a wound.” Likewise, there is a time to break down old walls, relationships, or even, metaphorically, hostility between nations (e.g., [Jer. 18:7, 9](#)), as well as a time to build them up. Intimately connected with these examples of the antitheses in God’s providence are the sorrows and joys that accompany the events described in verses [2-3](#). Solomon begins in verse [4](#) with “to weep” (*libkot*), possibly because the Hebrew word sounds so similar to the last word in the preceding set, *libnot* (“to build”). So also “to leap,” or “to dance” (*regod*) is probably used instead of “to rejoice” (*semeach*) because it sounds like “to mourn” (*sepod*).⁶ Accordingly, divine providence warrants times of laughter, joy, and pleasure as well as the joy of assonance.

This list of attitudes is continued in verse [5](#), which notes that what was once easily discarded as so many useless stones would on another occasion be earnestly sought out as valuable building materials. Thus men often treat one and the same material or person differently, depending on their condition, needs, and the controlling power of God. Put in proverbial terms, there is a time to embrace (the familiar) and a time to refrain from embracing.

So much for the usual, the common, the familiar in all its forms; but the same thing can be said for man’s desire to get

new things. There are times when mortals should seek new objects (v. 6), even though there will be other times when the same persons will lose some of those earthly treasures. Likewise, along with the acquisition of new properties, there are times for guarding things and times for throwing them away. For example, in verse 7 Solomon applied this contrast to the abandoning and preserving of clothing. When bad news came, it was appropriate in Solomon's time to rip the front of one's garments to display one's grief (2 Sam. 13:31); with the passing of the problem, it was proper to sew the torn clothes together again.

But what happens when the great calamities of life come? Here again, there are times when it is best to remain silent in the heat of adversity (2 Kings 2:3, 5), and there are times when one has to speak and cry out against the evil witnessed, even if to no one else but God (v. 7). Men are placed in situations in which they are stirred to love or are moved to hate. In Psalm 105:25, God "turned" the "hearts" of the Egyptians "to hate" and "to deal craftily" with Israel, whereas previously Israel had enjoyed favor from that same nation under the good hand of God as they asked for jewels (Exod. 11:3). So Solomon concluded the series with the message that there are divinely appointed times for war and peace (v. 8).

Yet the question persisted: What is to be gained from the whole scene? Ecclesiastes 3:9 is but a return to the question

of 1:3. The answer is clear. All life unfolds under the appointment of divine 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 a person by itself cannot change the times, circumstances, or control of events.

But 3:10 must be taken together with verse 11. For on further revelation, it must be boldly announced that God has made all the events and relationships in life “beautiful,” each having an appropriateness in and of themselves. And in addition to the beauty and appropriateness of this order of things, God has also implanted in the hearts of men a desire to know how his plan makes all the details fit together.

Everything, as it came from the hand of the Creator in Genesis 1, was “good” or “very good.” Even the activities of verses 2-8, which in themselves do not always appear beautiful, have a beauty when they are seen as constituent parts of the whole work of God. In God’s world plan, He “has made” all things to fit in their appointed time and place (v. 11). So integrated is this total work of God that man, likewise a creation of God, yearns in the depths of his being to trace the providential dealings of God’s government from beginning to the end; yet he cannot.

The key word in 3:11 is “eternity” (*ha’olam*): “God has put eternity into their heart” (emphasis added).⁷ This quest is a

deep-seated desire, a compulsive drive, because people are made in the image of God and are made to appreciate the beauty of creation (on an aesthetic level); to know the character, composition, and meaning of the world (on an academic and philosophical level); and to discern its purpose and destiny (on a theological level).¹ Therein lies the majesty and madness of the whole thing. Mortals have an inborn inquisitiveness and capacity to learn how everything in their experience can be integrated to make a whole. They want to know how the mundane “down-stairs” realm of ordinary, day-to-day living fits with the “upstairs” realm of the 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; and how one can accomplish the integration of the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. But in all the vastness and confusion of so much data, mortals are frustrated by the “puzzle” of selecting any one of the many facets of God’s “good” world as that part of life to which they will totally give themselves instead of beginning with giving themselves totally to God first of all.

So, to state it plainly, one first has to come to terms with the living God. Life and its “goods” are gifts from the hands of the living God² (vv. 13-15). Life will remain an enigma and a frustration until men and women come to “fear,” that is, to

believe, the God who made them, and that the goods, the truths, and all that is of this world is from our God. (See below for discussion of “the fear of God.”) God’s work and plan remain intact (v. 14). Just as men and women cannot, on their own, determine the end from the beginning of life, or one end from the other (v. 11), so also they cannot add anything to God’s plan or take anything from it (v. 14).

Why then does God allow such a great burden of worries, or cares, frustrations, and labors to fall on one’s shoulders if God can give: (1) mundane gifts, (2) the ability to enjoy those gifts, and (3) some knowledge of His all-encompassing plan? The answer is, “In order that they should fear before him” (v. 14). Obedience to the first commandment ([Exod. 20:3](#)) must come prior to receiving each of the above three requests; God must be Lord and Sovereign over all. Individuals must begin living by trusting nothing to their own abilities, devices, wisdom, or connections. “It is not,” as Paul summarized in [Romans 9:16](#), “to the one that wills [it], nor to one that runs, but to God who shows mercy.”

The “fear of God” ([3:14](#)) appears in Ecclesiastes at several crucial points (see [5:7](#); [7:18](#); [8:12-13](#) [three times]; and [12:13](#)). This “fear” is not an attitude of terror or dread. It is instead a commitment of the total being to trust and believe the living God. The preposition that accompanies the expression in [3:14](#) is forceful in supporting this view—“fear *before*

him” (emphasis added; cf. 8:12). The absolute lordship of God in this expression is supported in the parallel invitation for all the nations to come and worship God and “fear before him,” for “the Lord reigns” over the whole earth (cf. 1 Chron. 16:30; Psalm 96:9). The one who fears God dreads nothing more than God’s disfavor. Such a worshiper wants nothing more than to know the living God intimately and submit to His will. And God Himself wants to be known and obeyed by mortals; accordingly, God has shut men and women up to the enigma of life, yet He has also given them an unquenchable hunger to know how it all fits, from the simplest to the most profound segment of life; everything must cohere and smoothly link with all of that which is around it.

God’s purposes and His plan are unchangeable (v. 15). When the text says that God “calls back” or “seeks out” that which is “chased away,” it refers either to those who are persecuted (as argued by Luther, Rashi, and the Midrash) or to time itself, which from a human point of view had been lost, but which in God’s wise arrangement of events became available for God to be brought forward as a part of His wise plan, or as a witness at the last judgment. God, then, can in a sense call back the past and connect it with the future. With the hint of the divine evaluation in the future of the past deeds of men, we are prepared for the next section.

B. 3:16–4:16—THE FACTS: ANOMALIES MUST NOT BE USED
BY US TO DENY GOD’S PLAN

As noted already, six facts are brought forward by Solomon which otherwise might negate the thesis that God has a plan in operation that involves every person and every event.

¹⁶And something else I saw under the sun: in the place of justice, wickedness was there! And in the place of righteousness, injustice was there!

¹⁷I said in my heart: God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work.

¹⁸I said in my heart about the sons of the man, “God is testing them so that they can see that they are but animals.

¹⁹For what happens to the sons of the man is what happens to animals; one happening falls to both of them: as one dies so the other dies. All have one breath, man has no advantage [in that respect] over the animal, for everything is puzzling.

²⁰All are going to one place: all came from the dust; all return to the dust.

²¹Who notices that the spirit of the sons of the man is the one going upwards and the spirit of the animals is the one going downwards to the earth?”

²²So I saw that there was nothing better than a person should rejoice in one’s work, for that is one’s portion. For who will be able to bring one to see what will happen after

him/her?

¹Again I turned and saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun, and oh the tears of the oppressed! For they had no one to comfort them. Power was in the hands of their oppressors, but they had no comforter.

²So I congratulated the dead who had already died more than the living who were still alive,

³but better still than both of them is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

⁴I saw all the toil and all the success from work, but it is envied each by his neighbor. This is puzzling and a vexation of spirit.

⁵The fool folds his hand and eats his [own] flesh.

⁶Better is a handful with quietness than two hands full of toil and vexation of spirit.

⁷Again I turned and I saw a puzzle under the sun:

⁸There was one [man] without a second [one]; he had neither a son nor a brother; yet there was no end to all his toil. His eyes were not satisfied with wealth, “so for whom am I toiling and depriving myself of happiness [he said to himself]”? This too is a puzzling [business] and an unpleasant task.

⁹Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their work.

¹⁰For if the one falls, the other can lift up his companion.

But woe to the one who falls and there is no second person to help him up.

¹¹Also, if two lie down together, they keep warm. But how can you keep warm [alone]?

¹²Though one may be overpowered, two can stand against him [the enemy]; a three-ply cord is not quickly snapped.

¹³Better is a poor but wise child than an old and foolish king who does not know how to be admonished any longer.

¹⁴For from the prison house he emerged to reign; although he was born poor in his kingdom.

¹⁵I saw all the living, who were walking under the sun, along with the second child who would succeed him.

¹⁶[There is] no end to all the people, to all who were before him; also the ones coming later will not rejoice in him. Even this also is a puzzle and a vexation of spirit.

1. UNRIGHTEOUSNESS IN THE HALLS OF GOVERNMENT

(3:16-17)

So grievous an exception to the overall plan of a good God is unrighteousness in the halls of government that Solomon immediately appended the words of verse 17 (“...God will judge righteousness and wickedness, for there is a time for every matter and for every work”) as an answer to the charge of verse 16— “wickedness was in the place of justice.” God had instituted human tribunals (“the place of judgment” [v. 16] is a court of law) as places where men could expect

to find judicial relief. But when wickedness is offered where justice should be found, that is a matter of utmost seriousness. Similarly, “the place of righteousness” (v. 16) is the house of God, where one would also expect a fair hearing and correction of injustice and evil. Such inequities, when both the law courts and the house of God fail the oppressed, God Himself will rectify in the future judgment, even though their cases appear temporarily to run unattended and to be adjudicated unfairly. Wronging the innocent and clearing the guilty is dangerous business, for all who practice such crookedness and demagoguery will face the Judge of all judges in that final judgment.

Some have incorrectly argued that Qoheleth denied that there was any system of justice by which punishment would come to evildoers and God-fearing citizens would be protected. But such arguments asserting divine arbitrariness go counter to what the text clearly asserts. Verse 17 showed that the Teacher believed God would judge human beings even if the time when He did so was not always clearly stated—it is only the timing of God’s judgment that is not declared here.

Moreover, what we know today as “activistic judges,” who create their own new laws from the bench, without reference to any constitution or governing document, which new creations also usually run counter to God’s laws, can expect God’s judgment as well, even if it does not come until the

future when all appear at the judgment seat of Christ.

2. DEATH COMES TO ALL (3:18-21)

Although nothing is so prominent at times as the savage way men tyrannize one another in and out of the courts of the land, 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: both are subject to death.

Yet by this very same fact, God shows mortals their frailty in an effort to force them to turn back and search for Himself: to come to the realization that all goods are from His hand, to receive from His hand the ability to enjoy those gifts, and to come to appreciate His sovereign plan.

Tragically, we seldom take to heart as we ought to the reality of death. We moderns 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 those in Solomon's day. 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 or the death rattles from them.

Most people conclude that since "all go to one place" (v. 20), that is, the "grave" (here the idea is not "hell"), that is the end of it. Certainly, both men and beasts are made out of

dust, and their bodies return to the dust; but what poor gamblers men and women are if they believe that that is the end of the matter. Verse 21 deliberately adds in the clearest tones possible (despite very little help from some translations or most commentators), “The spirit of man *goes upward*, but the spirit of the beast *goes down* to the earth-” (emphasis mine). The verbs “to go upward” and “to go downward” are active participles with the article attached to them and not, as some incorrectly insist, the Hebrew sign of the interrogative. As Leupold has accurately rendered this concept, “There are not many who take to heart as they ought to the fact that the spirit of man goeth upward and that the spirit of the beast goeth downward to the earth.”⁸ The presence of the long “a” in the prefix *ha-* instead of the short “a” shows that the Hebrew scribes, called the Masoretes, did not regard verse 21 as an interrogative or conditional sentence. Had not Solomon also argued already that unjust judges will face the living God at some point (3:17)? And will not God with consistency press the same facts into service in [Ecclesiastes 12:7](#): “The dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it”? What would be the point of concluding his book with the ominous warning about the future that “God will bring every deed into judgment” ([12:14](#)) if men and women are dead and gone forever once they die? If that were the case, who would care if God reprimanded our worms after we

had long ceased to exist? Neither they nor our dust will much care. But such is not Solomon's thought.

Concepts of man's immortality are as old as Enoch, the seventh from Adam ([Jude 14](#)); his body entered the eternal state directly. Even patriarchal Job knew that death was not the end of life. He observed that if you chop down a tree, it often sends out new "shoots" from the old stump ([Job 14:7](#)). Likewise, he contended, if you chop down a man so that he dies, there is hope for him that he too will also "shoot" again in new life ([Job 14:14](#); the same root word as in verse 7 is used here, although the fact is obscured in the translations). The same point of view was affirmed by the psalmist in [Psalm 49:12-15](#), where he too argued that "man...is like the beasts that perish. Like sheep they are laid in the grave...But God will redeem my soul/life (Hebrew *nephesh*) from the power of the grave, for he will receive me", (NKJV).

If it is argued, as it often is, that verse 21 must be a question because it begins with "who knows," Leupold ⁹ convincingly protests that in the nine passages where this expression appears in the Hebrew Bible, only three are followed by the interrogative ([Esther 4:14](#); [Eccles. 2:19](#); [6:12](#)). In another three cases, "Who knows" is followed by a direct object ([Ps. 90:11](#); [Eccles. 3:21](#); [8:1](#)); three more times it is either followed by the imperfect verb, or it is a kind of afterthought and means something like "perhaps" ([Prov. 24:24](#); [Joel 2:14](#); [Jonah 3:9](#)). Only the context will determine whether or not

the Hebrew phrase is interrogative. Here the phrase calls for a direct object and is not a nonchalant remark that no one is actually able to tell the difference between the fates of men and animals; they can and must!

Men and beasts, then, do differ. A person may be like the beasts in one way—his or her frail body may return to the dust. But his or her spirit/life goes upward to God; whether reserved for judgment or some more pleasant prospect, the writer does not pause at this point to say.

In the meantime, God has something that men may inherit: their portion, if they meet the previously stated conditions of belief, is that they may be able to enjoy their work in this life (v. 22). The rhetorical question “Who can bring him to appreciate what will be after him?” is again not answered at this point, but the context is abundantly clear, as is the conclusion to Ecclesiastes: it is God who will in the future evaluate life in its totality.

3. OPPRESSION OF GOD’S PEOPLE (4:1-3)

Another complaint emerges to threaten the beauty of the plan of God—oppression (4:1-3). What list of possible injuries that can be done to a person, their property, or a person’s good name by rulers, masters, fathers, husbands, or any others in positions of power or responsibility, is found here? For those rulers have the power. The lot of the oppressed often is that there is the absence of any “com-

forter” (v. 1). To be without a comforter is worse than death itself (v. 2). Like Jonah ([Jonah 4:3](#)) and Elijah ([1 Kings 19:4](#)), the oppressed cry, “Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live”, (NIV). In fact, so powerfully wrong and so solitary does the case of the oppressed appear, that, like Job ([Job 3:3-10](#)), the oppressed prefer non-existence to existence (v. 3). Our mourner will not recover until he, like the psalmist Asaph ([Ps. 73:17](#)), goes into the house of God ([Eccles. 5:1-6](#)) and considers what “the end” of such oppressors will be.

The problem of the oppressor and the oppressed in the history of mankind inevitably turned on the struggle of the strong over the weak; the strong who were able to impose their will over others. Even in a democracy there can be the “tyranny of the majority,” if the principles guiding that majority are not taken from the Word of God. Without a God to answer to, humanists and secularists have little or no motivation to act righteously or to abstain from wickedness—especially if by that evil they can get their own way. As a result, the only outlook on life for such materialists is one of cynical resignation (vv. 2-3).

4. ENVY FROM OTHERS ([4:4-6](#))

To the previous three obstacles to acceptance of the overall principle that God’s plan encompasses everything is now added the observation that mortals can be as cruel and

inhuman to each other in unnecessary competition as they can be in outright oppression. Often the rule of the business world is the law of the jungle. Every success is greeted with envy from others instead of the expected compliments or praise. “Every right work,” or “every successful undertaking” (v. 4), is received as Cain greeted his brother Abel’s goodness, or as Saul failed to rejoice over the success of David’s undertakings against the enemy.

It might appear justifiable to just plain forget it all. Why should anyone want to work so hard in a dog-eat-dog world, only to be envied as the reward for one’s success? Yet Qoheleth warns that such an attitude must not be an excuse for laziness. And to seal that logic, he adds a proverb (v. 5) against the idleness of the fool who folds his hands and comes to ruin, for he figuratively “eats his own flesh” as he consumes what substance he had stored up. In [Proverbs 6:10](#) (also in [24:33](#)), folded hands act as a symbol of idleness, which inevitably leads to poverty.

Instead of cruel competitiveness, Solomon recommends moderation. Verse 6 is similar to the Pauline injunction, “Godliness with contentment is great gain” ([1 Tim. 6:6](#)); or even the Solomonic proverbs: “Better is a little with the fear of the Lord” ([Prov. 15:16](#), cf. v. [17](#); [17:1](#)) and “Better is little with righteousness than great treasures with injustice” ([Prov. 16:8](#)). A small amount of food eaten in peace is to be preferred to an elaborate meal where strife is

present as well.

5. ISOLATION AND SOLITARINESS (4:7-12)

There are more problems for theodicy, i.e., justifying the ways of God to mortals. What about the sadness of isolation and solitariness? Escape from competition may be a temporary solution, but then one has to cope with the issue of loneliness. This is a situation in which there is no family left, not even an heir for whom one could work and deprive one's self of pleasure. Previously we have seen "no comforter" (4:1-3) and "no rest" (4:4-6), but now there is "no companion" (4:7-12): What can be said to this situation?

Solomon had a proverb for this situation as well: "Two are better than one" (v. 9). Society, not the solitary life of a hermit or the like, and perhaps even marriage, but not the single life of celibacy, are to be preferred. For in such intimacy, and in the shared life, these are the resources that are made available: assistance (v. 10), comfort (v. 11), and defense of one another (v. 12). In each of the proverbs of verses 9-12, the advantages of cooperation and companionship are emphasized. In fact, if two are better than one, three friends provide even greater comradeship (v. 12b).

6. POPULARITY IS TEMPORARY (4:13-16)

With a slight variation in the order of things, the proverbial answer comes first this time (v. 13), whereas in this sixth,

and final objection, the obstacle comes last. How fleeting and altogether temporary is the popularity accorded persons! What does it matter if someone has even royal power? In one case, the old king, although born to the throne, becomes foolish, senile, and unable to discern that his days of ruling are over. In another situation, a young (but poor and wise) person, like Joseph in the patriarchal times (see [Gen. 37–50](#)), may rise from prison to the throne. Such are the constant ups and downs of life, for although the young man was welcomed at first (v. 15), he, too, will no doubt share his predecessor's fate: "Those who come later will not be pleased with him" (v. 16). How fickle people are! 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. Now how can the plan of God encompass the likes of such disparities?

C. 5:1-17—THE IMPLICATIONS: CERTAIN WARNINGS AND CAUTIONS TO US ARE IN ORDER

Despite the reality of the obstacles just surveyed in [3:16–4:16](#), none of these can or should be offered as an excuse for neglecting one's relationship to God or for abandoning the concept that God's rule embraces all of reality. Even though some may be tempted to reflect on the six anomalies, or alleged contradictions, over against the universality of God's plan and purpose for everything and

everyone, mortals must not be led into a practical atheism or be tempted to think or to act as if God were not in control.

(The numbering of the verses in chapter 5 differs in Hebrew from the English, for the last verse of chapter 4 in Hebrew is the first verse of chapter 5 in English, and so the numbering of the verses in Hebrew for the fifth chapter is always one less than the English verse number.)

¹(4:17H) Guard your steps when you go into the house of God; draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil.

²(1H) Do not be rash with your mouth, and do not let your heart be hasty to utter anything before God, for God is in heaven and you are on the earth, therefore let your words be few.

³(2H) As a dream comes when there are many activities, so a fool's speech is accompanied by many words.

⁴(3H) When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed.

⁵(4H) It is better not to vow than that you should make a solemn promise and not pay it.

⁶(5H) Do not let your mouth cause you to sin. And do not say before the messenger, "It was a mistake!" Why should God be furious with what you say and destroy the work of your hands?

⁷(6H) For many dreams and many words are worthless; instead, fear God.

⁸(7H) If you see the poor oppressed and robbery of justice and rights throughout the district, do not be astonished at such matters, for one official is watching another official and over both of them are others higher still.

⁹(8H) And an advantage of the land in everything is this: a king benefits from a field.

¹⁰(9H) Whoever loves silver [money] will not be satisfied with silver [money]. Whoever loves wealth will not profit; this too is a puzzle.

¹¹(10H) As goods increase, those consuming them increase. What is the advantage to their owners, except that their eyes look on them?

¹²(11H) The sleep of the laborer is sweet, whether he eats a little or much; but the abundance of the rich does not allow him to sleep.

¹³(12H) There is a serious evil I have seen under the sun; riches were hoarded by their owner to his harm.

¹⁴(13H) But that wealth was lost to a bad venture, so that when he fathered a son, there was nothing left for him.

¹⁵(14H) As he came out from his mother's womb, naked shall he depart, just as he came, and he will carry nothing from his labor which he can take in his hand.

¹⁶(15H) This too is a serious evil, exactly as he came, so he will go. What profit does he have for all that he labors for

the wind?

¹⁷(16H) All his days he eats in darkness with much vexation, sickness and frustration.

The Teacher's strong advice for us, above all else, is to "go to the house of God" (5:1), but we are to go with a receptive attitude and a readiness to listen rather than lecture God on what He ought to do or how things should be run. Worship is here called "sacrifice" because it is offering to God "the calves/fruit of our lips" (the Hebrew word for both terms is very similar; cf. Hosea 14:2; Heb. 13:15) in lieu of animal sacrifices. The implication seems to be that the "sacrifice of fools" consists of excessive talk, especially talk that has little or no heart behind it, which seems to be borne out in verse 2. Therefore, to avoid looking like a fool, it is best to limit one's speaking in God's presence and be more ready to listen to what God has to say instead of offering a lot of chatter. Do not give the impression from your blustering verbiage that you believe you have achieved some kind of super status and what you have to say is all that important—to God (or even to human beings). Remember, you are on earth and God is in heaven!

Neither should men attempt to bribe God with vows (vv. 4-7). How frivolous and unbecoming can mere mortals act? "God is in heaven and [we] are on earth" (5:2), as Solomon had already reminded us. Therefore, our words should be few. And thereby we are rebuked for all pretense, hypocrisy,

and superficial religiosity by which we hope to be heard merely for our verbosity or “much speaking” (cf. [Matt. 6:7](#)). Limits are imposed only on the petitioner’s pretense, and not on the length of his prayers. There may be times when a person’s importunity (and hence the length and persistence of one’s prayer) demonstrates the value and importance of what one asks from God, by the fact that the request is serious enough to be persistently on one’s mind, even as Jacob refused to let the Angel of the Lord go until he blessed him ([Gen. 32:26](#)). On the other hand, only fools babble on relentlessly, like a man who has had a busy day and experiences dream after dream all night long (v. 3).

But when vows are made to God, they must be carried out (v. 5). Ananias and Sapphira deliberately lied, when there was no need for them to do so, and therefore they experienced the serious judgment of God ([Acts 5:1-11](#)). It would have been better had they never vowed anything at all, or even if they had promised to give to God only a part of their land, rather than pretending that they too were giving the proceeds for the entire parcel to the apostles; but they had decided to toy with God in the hopes of gaining greater esteem in the estimation of the other believers in the early church.

The application of verses [6-7](#) is clear: do not sin with your mouth and do not protest to God’s minister (the Hebrew word literally meaning “angel”; cf. [Hag. 1:13](#) and [Mal. 2:7](#),

where “angel” means “priest,” or “minister,” for the Lord. The Greek Septuagint translated the Hebrew word for “messenger” or “angel” as “God,” perhaps as the “Angel of the Lord”?). Accordingly, we must watch our mouths when we contemplate such obstacles to faith and enigmas as life produces (cf. [Matt. 5:33-36](#)). Men must learn that their first order of business is to fear God. True piety is the only remedy for every temptation offered us to spew out a sally of empty words against God’s good operation of all things. This conclusion agrees with [12:13](#). A mortal must begin as a believer and worshiper if he is ever to enjoy living as God intended him to live.

Now that Solomon has established his dominant theme—the fear of God as his (and our) number-one priority (v. [7](#))—he now turns to some of the cases he had previously introduced. His work moves more and more in the direction of a theodicy, that is, an explanation and justification of the ways of God to men. Commentators typically disallow this type of “fear of God” to be connected with anything like a “reverential awe of God,” or leading to any emotional and sacred attachment to God Himself. They refuse to connect this verse with [12:13](#), claiming that the so-called “frame-narrator” in [12:13](#) meant a higher meaning than what Qoheleth meant here in verse [7](#). But that analysis is one that is foisted on the text rather than one that comes directly from the text itself.

The Teacher moves from advising what our relationship should be to God in verses 1-7 to noting how we should relate to the king in verses 8-17 and how our wealth and possessions are to be shared with both.

First of all, in the problem of the perversion of justice (see 3:16-18), Qoheleth now appeals in 5:8 to the fact that there remains a tribunal that is higher than those officials who perpetrate those wrongs. It is the tribunal owned and operated by God. Some have choked on the word “province” or “district” (v. 8, Hebrew *medinah*) and argued that the word was unknown in Israel during Solomon’s time, as it must be a Persian loan-word in their judgment. But it must be remembered that Solomon was acquainted with many languages because of his many contacts with the nations of the world. Thus it is natural that he would use a word for a “district” found outside of Israel in Persia at that time. Nevertheless, however we evaluate the word “district,” let no one be surprised, the highest judge of all is the One who will evaluate every judgment ever made in any court of law—then or now!

Verse 9 continues in the same vein of thought. Good government by a delegated officer, or the “higher-up” person, is a great blessing to any country. This is one source of correction of some of the abuses witnessed by mortals. Happy indeed is that country that recognizes that such “profit” of the land brings a blessing on everyone; ruler and people are

happiest when they both realize that they are served by the farmed fields. But should human government also fail, there is still redress from God, who will not fail to adjudicate the injustices and unfair acts of those who govern.

As for the other problems previously raised, Solomon summarizes his case in [5:10-17](#). It is a case for the unsatisfactory nature of wealth and labor in and of themselves. There is little, if any, “benefit” in riches *per se*, he says. Consider that:

- Human desire outruns acquisitions, no matter how large the acquisitions may be ([v. 10](#)).
- An increase in wealth demands a corresponding increase in staff to manage it. Wealth, unfortunately, seems to attract all sorts of parasites ([v. 11](#)).
- Labor may bring sleep, but wealth brings sleeplessness and the fear that a blunder may result in the loss of everything ([v. 12](#)).
- Possession is so uncertain and so brief, for often by some accident or speculation (evil travail or misfortune, [v. 14](#)) the estate dwindles down to nothing.
- Last of all, the wealthy person himself must return to his or her Maker devoid of all the riches, not even having a cloak ([vv. 13-16](#)). Nevertheless, there still are people who will spend all their days in great sorrow and distressing labor for such an empty goal as this ([v. 17](#)).

D. 5:18-20 — CONCLUSION

The conclusion remains the same as we have noted above (5:18-20, Hebrew, vv. 17-19): man must get enjoyment, not possessions, out of life. And that capacity to enjoy them, no matter how great or how small, must come as a gift from God ¹. It is much better to receive wealth as a gift from God, simultaneously with the God-given ability to enjoy it, than to see wealth and riches as ends in themselves. The condition for the reception of this gift is the same as it was in 2:26, and therefore it is not repeated.

How sad that mortals spend all their days working and sweating to receive the enjoyment that God offers as a gift if people would only seek it in the manner that He, in his excellent and beautiful plan, has chosen to give it. Happiness, enjoyment, pleasure, and a knowledge of how the whole substance of life is integrated into a meaningful pattern in the plan of God are all linked in the living God. To know the “eternity” of all things, if we may rephrase [John 17:3](#), is “to know Him.”

¹ W. Sibley Towner, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*. Leander E. Keck, ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), vol. 5, p.319.

² In *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, p. 168), Tremper Longman III continues his pessimistic view of

the book by saying: “...his [Qoheleth’s] depressing tone may be heard in the last words of the verse [17], the few days God has given that person, for that is his reward.” But T. A. Perry, in *Dialogues with Kohelet* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993, p. 113), seemed to be more on track when he noted, “Despite the general preference for interpretations denoting paucity...the sense here is definitely not pessimistic. Gordis (1968) cites [Job 14:5](#)... ‘the number of his months,’ (where man’s days are numbered). However, even this example does not argue limitation in the sense of ‘few,’ but rather the more relevant sense of a providential determination, a numbering that God performs at birth or from the beginning.”

3 Michael Kelley. *The Burden of God: Studies in Wisdom and Civilization from the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Minneapolis, MN: Contra Mundum Books, 1993), p. 84.

4 Rousas John Rushdoony. *Revolt Against Maturity* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1977), p. 228.

5 Herbert C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1952), p. 82.

6 Christian D. Ginsburg, *Cohemoth, Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes* [1861]; reprinted in *The Song of Songs and Cohemoth (Commonly Called the Book of Ecclesiastes)*, The Library of Biblical Studies, edited by Harry M. Orlinsky (New York: Ktav, 1970), p. 305.

7 Brian P. Gault (“What Has God Placed in the Human Heart? An Analysis of [Ecclesiastes 3:11](#),” paper read at the *Evangelical*

Theological Society Meeting on 15 November 2006) showed that there were no fewer than ten interpretive options for ha'olam, "eternity," utilizing metonymy, revocalization, and emendation to solve the problem. Sadly, he opts for "darkness" as the correct meaning, saying God desires people to stop trying to find the mysteries of His revealed will and to get on with living joyfully!

⁸ Leupold, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

⁹ Leupold, *op. cit.*, p. 99.