

INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

PART TWO – CHAPTERS 3-6 – WHEN LIFE SEEMS FUTILE

In the first eight verses of chapter three, Solomon reviews some of the contrasts and dilemmas of life.

Some we control – Plant or uproot? Tear down or build up? Search or give up? Keep or throw away? Tear apart or sew together? Be silent or speak? - Others we do not control – give birth or die?

Some involve deep emotions of different kinds – Weep or laugh? Mourn or dance? Embrace or shun embracing?

Some raise moral questions – Kill or heal? Love or hate? Throw stones or gather stones? War or peace?

Events happen. Some are good. Some are bad. Constantly we strive to turn life in our favour. Much of the frustration of life is that even our best efforts do not work out. What is the answer? Solomon sets out his second moment of revelation in this letter. Do not bother to try to predict the future. Paul said the same.(II Cor.5:7) Get on with your life and work. God has put eternity in our hearts.(I Jn.5:11,12) He can handle every circumstance whether it looks nice or nasty.(Rom.8:28) Enjoy Him and trust Him with each moment and event. Then we will be able to make a difference, to be an agent for good. What God does will last. What I do will not.(3:1-15)

Solomon launches now into a discussion of a problem which troubles him greatly, the problem of evil in the world. There is so much wickedness with which one day God will deal. All of us will first die, whether man or beast. Then which way do we go, up or down? In the light of his second revelation from God, Solomon determines in the meantime to make the most of every day.(3:16-22)

In the next chapter Solomon continues his examination of evil. As leader of his country he was very aware of what went on in the nations around him. Many of those with power abuse it by oppressing those for whom they are meant to care. No-one seems to care enough to step in and stop suffering. Would it not be better to be dead or even never to have been born?(4:1-3)

So much that is achieved in our society is the result of competition, trying to better someone else. The alternative of sitting back and doing nothing is foolish too.(4:4-6) Why work to accumulate assets if we have no-one to pass them on to? Solomon presents his third major revelation. Work is so much more meaningful if we can do it in partnership with someone else. Each can lift up the other in difficult times. We can encourage and defend each other. But even better than the support of a partner is the strength of a rope with three strands. Who is the third partner? The Lord Himself!(4:7-12)

The chapter ends with an interesting scenario of a foolish old king being replaced by a poor young man released from prison to take his place. Who has most to offer?(4:13-16)

Solomon takes a break from 'vanity', the hard questions, to offer some of his God given wisdom characteristic of the book of Proverbs. He presents 6 timeless truths.

Prayer is more about listening to God than telling Him what He already knows which would be foolish.(5:1-3)

Don't lightly promise anything to God that you are not sure He wants of you.(5:4-7)

Be concerned about how the poor are oppressed by an ineffective bureaucracy.(5:8,9)

More money never satisfies but honest work does.(5:10-12)

We are born with nothing and die with nothing so why hoard riches?(5:13-17)

So enjoy the Lord and the work He gives us.(5:18-20)

In chapter six Solomon, one of the richest men of his time, returns to the problems posed by riches. Why, he asks, are some men blessed with every material thing but someone else takes it all from them before they can enjoy what they have? Why do others have many children and live long lives but die disappointed?(6:1-6) We work to eat but are never satisfied. What is the value in being wise rather than a fool? What is the point of being rich rather than poor? Is it not pointless to have to live with unmet desire?(6:7-9) We cannot argue with those who are stronger, or cleverer with words. Life is brief and fleeting, and we do not know what comes next! Is it not all futile?(6:10-12)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR FURTHER STUDY

1. What difficult choices in life does Solomon describe? What modern situations would fit these hard decisions? How does he encourage us to make these choices? Do you agree with his view of the future?(Phil.1:18-24) What might be missing?(chap.3)
2. What special choices do leaders face?(Lk.22:24-27) To what responsibilities do they therefore have to respond?(Tit.1:5-9) What important secret for handling tough times does Solomon explain?(Rom.5:1-5; James 1:2-8) How have you found this secret to be helpful in your life?(chap.4)
3. What does Solomon advise about prayer and promises to God? How does he this time warn about the consequence of a love of money on us and those whose lives we affect?(I Tim.6:6-12) Where instead does he say real satisfaction will come from?(chap.5)
4. What causes for a sense of futility are described in this next chapter?(Phil.3:7-11) If Solomon does not answer his own questions how could we help him with our knowledge of Jesus?(chap.6)