**BCM Bible Study: March 31/April 1, 2021**

**Ecclesiastes 3-4**

Introduction: How did the challenge to embrace limits and find enjoyment in life go? What was it like for you to set aside other priorities for these things?

Facing the Times: **Read Ecclesiastes 3:1-8**

* What is the point of the Teacher listing out these facets of life? **(**We will see a fuller answer to this question as we keep reading, but for now we see that the Teacher seeks to describe everything a human might experience.)
* Do you find yourself in one of these “times” right now?
  + Which ones do you try to avoid?
  + Which ones do you think it should always be time for?
  + Overall, how does this list challenge how you think about life?

**Read Ecc. 3:9-15**

* The list in 3:1-8 leads the Teacher to re-ask his original question from 1:3. Why?
  + Much like chapter 1, we see that the world is a certain way that is beyond our control. But here, we see an additional element – God is in control of all things.
* The key to understanding this section is v.11. Iain Provan offers this summary: “This point is that mortals share with God a sense of the whole sweep of time, which has been given them by God himself, but that they cannot move on to comprehend it or control it; it is always slipping away from them.”
  + Why does God put eternity into our hearts without allowing us to fully understand all of time like God does? (This is meant to draw us to the mindset of vv.12-15)

**Read Ecc. 3:16-22** (**Note**: I am skipping over 16-17 here because justice is discussed in ch. 4)

* What is the message of 18-22? In what way are we no different from animals?
* The “testing” of v.18 basically means that God “leads mortals to purity of heart and clarity of perception, to a place where they are able to see ‘straight’, without allusions. For they think of themselves of gods, but human beings are mortal, just like the beasts.” (Provan)
  + In what way do people think of themselves as “gods” in the sense that the Teacher is describing?

In verses 9-22, the Teacher is challenging us to think of life rightly and act accordingly. What is that right way of thinking about life? (Life itself is a gift; to see it as a means to an end or an opportunity for profit is to misunderstand not only life, but our relationship to God and creation.)

* We live in an age of individualism that says “I can only trust myself.” In what ways do you find yourself falling into that way of thinking?
* This section challenges us to move from a self-centered way of life to a God-centered way of life. What could that shift look like for you?
* Instead of being anti-fun, this section affirms that Christians should enjoy life. What is the difference between legalism and honoring God?

The Primacy of Others: Before beginning this section, have everyone give a **brief** answer to this question: What are your goals for the future? Keep this in mind as we look at the text.

**Read Ecc. 4:1-3.** How would you define oppression?

* “Oppression is accumulation – the seeking after profit – without regard to the nature, needs, and rights of people.” (Provan)
  + Given this definition, what are ways that oppression can take place within the patterns of “normal” life?
  + How have you seen the drive for success come at the cost of those with less resources and power?
* In it easy to hear things like this and think that we are talking about a social gospel or politics, or that these things are of secondary importance. **Read Deut. 24:14-15, James 2:14-17, 1 John 4:19-21**. Why is caring for one another central to the gospel and the heart of God?

**Read Ecc. 4:4-6**. The root of the desire for advancement or achievement is envy. What is envy?

* In what ways do you experience envy? How have you seen it create alienation with others?
* Consider the future goals you stated. What would change about these goals if you were to root out individualistic thinking in favor of communal thinking or the needs of others?
  + The words “communal thinking” may be difficult for some to swallow because it is against the thinking of the American Dream. What do these verses say about the concept of the American Dream?
  + **Read Luke 12:15-21.** How does this parable challenge you?

**Read Ecc. 4:7-16.** What is the message of v. 7-16? How do they highlight the importance of community?

* It is notable that these verses envision difficulty in community. They do not say that community will alleviate suffering, only that community is integral in times of suffering.
  + Do you feel like you have healthy community right now? Why or why not?
  + How have you seen community serve an important role in your life?
  + In what ways could community most serve you right now?
* 13-16 can be summarized like this: “In contrast to an old and foolish king, there was once a poor and wise youth, who managed to rise above his humble beginnings ad ascend to the throne. Yet later generations would not rejoice in him; his successes and popularity did not last.” (ESV Study Bible notes)
  + How does this story serve as a final challenge to the way we think about a life well-lived?

Conclusion

Jesus nor the Teacher ever promise that following Christ will lead to utopia where we have perfect community and oppression ceases. So we should think that the only changes that matters are big and global in scale. Instead, we should look to how we can live our daily lives in an other-centered, God-glorifying way. As a first step, consider one of these actions:

1. Research fair trade and try to buy as many of those products as possible. (Resources in the notes)
2. Give something away to someone in need.
3. Seek out a tangible way to help your neighbors/friends.

Notes:

* 3:1-8 lists out extremes as a way of embracing everything between the extremes. There may be some numerology here as there are 14 pairs of statements (7 represents perfection). This could symbolize the perfect whole of life.
* The list makes us ask – should war and killing be considered as something for which there is an appointed time? Perhaps each of these statements should be understood with their pair. In other words, killing and breaking down could be analogous. But we must reckon with God-ordained war and death. There is, evidently, a “time” for these. But in these cases, it was clearly not a time for man to determine. Most of all, I don’t think these can be used to excuse human actions of violence of hatred. The New Testament (and the Old if you are reading careful) speak against human violence on an individual level. These statements in Ecclesiastes are merely a statement of reality about how the world is. All of Ecclesiastes is trying to come to terms with life in a broken world. This list, if it did not include these painful realities, would not be doing that.
* “Scattering stones” in v.5 is intriguing. It could have to do with hostile action against an enemy. But more likely, it is an image of the accumulation and distribution of wealth.
* The business described in 3:10 corresponds to 1:13. See notes there.
* 3:15 is a tricky verse. The basic gist is that God is “seeking the past” to make things right in some sense. Broadly speaking, we can say that God will rectify all that is broken.
* In 3:18-22, we must remember again that the Teacher’s view of the afterlife is not as complete as ours. But his message is not diminished by the NT. We are still called to live well today. See 1 Cor. 15:58. The impact of the resurrection is life lived well *now*.
* The words of 4:1-3 are intense. It is reminiscent of the psalmist lamenting his birth. We don’t need to overly criticize or overthink these things. Instead, recognize that these words give voice to common human thoughts and feelings. It would be incorrect to take away the theological point that oppression means that we shouldn’t have children.
* 4:4-6 speak against laziness as does 2 Thess. 3:10. These verses present a balance – work is needed, but overwork is *hevel*.
* 4:12 is often used to describe romantic relationships, saying that God and two others is an unbreakable union. This is not a wrong idea, but not the original idea of the passage. Instead, the idea is more that a companion of people can better ward off an attacker. Again, this is certainly true in a romantic relationship, so don’t be grumpy is people use it that way :)
* Don’t get too caught up on 4:13-16. There are some very difficult interpretive issues, but I think the ESV’s statement gives the gist of the Teacher’s intended message.

Fair Trade Resources

In short, fair trade refers to a concern for ethical product production, trading, and consumption. Around the world, many products are produced for low wages and in poor conditions. Fair trade is concerned with fair treatment and conditions for both those making the products and the environmental footprint of production. Fair trade is a concept that many in culture embrace, but this does not mean it is not Christian. The heart of fair trade is the heart of God – that we have concern and care for all people.

* Websites like [this one](https://www.fairtradecertified.org/why-fair-trade) (see embedded video) explain the importance of fair trade and share how it is happening. A google search will introduce you to many others. Also see [this site](https://fairtrade-advocacy.org/the-fair-trade-movement-2/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CFair%20Trade%20is%20a%20trading,workers%20%E2%80%93%20especially%20in%20the%20South.).
* “Good on You” is an app focus on helping you buy clothes from more ethical sources.
* A BCM alum runs this organization: <https://www.handsproducinghope.org/>