

Many erroneous doctrines have been drawn from the book of Ecclesiastes due to a lack of understanding of its context. Solomon had become frustrated with the pointlessness of living in a sinful world among people who are sinful by nature. Most of the views expressed by Solomon are in the context of temporal life here on earth (“under the sun”) and ignored eternal considerations.

1 So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of *such as were* oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors *there was* power; but they had no comforter.

“So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun” – After describing his observations expressed in previous chapters, Solomon returns to considering life on earth and begins discussing the subject of oppression on earth.

“and behold the tears of *such as were* oppressed, and they had no comforter” – Solomon saw the tears of those being oppressed and the fact that they had no comforter to rescue or give them relief from their situation.

“and on the side of their oppressors *there was* power [strength]” – Solomon understood that oppressors used the fact that they were stronger than their victims in order to take what they wanted. The oppressed had no strength with which to defend themselves.

“but they had no comforter” – Most commentators believe that Solomon is repeating the observation that the oppressed have no comforters to help them against these strong oppressors. However, one commentator suggested that Solomon may have been stating that these oppressors will have no comforter when God’s judgment falls on them, but, while true, that view seems out of context since Solomon is concentrating on earthly consequences “under the sun” and not the eternal consequences.

2 Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive. 3 Yea, better *is he* than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

“Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive” – From an earthly standpoint, the dead are better off than the living because they no longer have to suffer the troubles and trials of life that the living are still experiencing (such as the oppression of v. 1).

“Yea, better *is he* than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun” – Solomon believes that someone who has not yet been born is in a better position than both the person who is now dead and the person who is still living. The dead have already experienced suffering, the living are still suffering, but someone who has not yet been born has never experienced suffering.

4 Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This *is* also vanity and vexation of spirit.

“Again, I considered all travail [labor; toil], and every right [successful; profitable] work” – Solomon turns his attention to people who work hard and are successful. They are reaping the rewards of their labor.

“that for this a man is envied of his neighbour” – Many people are jealous of those who have become wealthy through their hard work. Perhaps they don’t have the talent required to make money or else they are unwilling to do the work necessary, but either situation doesn’t prevent them from being jealous of those who have earned their wealth through hard work.

“This *is* also vanity [vapor] and vexation [striving] of spirit [wind]” – The phrase “vexation of spirit” could be paraphrased as “striving after the wind.” Solomon is emphasizing the pointlessness of being jealous of the rich if you are not willing to do the work they did to become wealthy or if God has not given you the ability to make money. Either it is not God’s will or you are too lazy to do the work necessary to make money.

5 The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh. 6 Better *is* an handful *with* quietness, than both the hands full *with* travail and vexation of spirit.

“The fool foldeth his hands together” – This is an Hebrew idiom meaning to fold your arms together in a posture of idleness.

“and eateth his own flesh” – This is also an Hebrew idiom that refers to someone wasting away because he has nothing to eat. This fool is too lazy to work to obtain food for himself, and so he will starve (2 Th. 3:10 “For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat”).

“Better *is* an handful *with* quietness, than both the hands full *with* travail [labor; toil] and vexation [striving] of spirit [wind]” – A handful here refers to whatever you have gained, be it food, money, or some other material good. Solomon states that it is better to have a single handful that you can enjoy in peace because you have worked to earn it honestly than it would be to have both hands full but you can’t enjoy it because you apparently acquired them through questionable means. The travail and vexation refer to the trouble and strife you are enduring because of how your handfuls were acquired so that you are unable to enjoy them.

7 Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun.

Solomon looked around some more and now he address more “vanity” (vapor; fig. pointlessness) that he has observed in the world.

8 There is one *alone*, and *there is* not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet *is there* no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither *saith he*, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This *is* also vanity, yea, it *is* a sore travail.

“There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother” – The vanity that Solomon has observed is the situation where a man has no children or other family member with which to share his life. He is alone.

“yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches” – This man seems to be a workaholic, working incessantly in pursuit of becoming wealthy.

“neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good?” – However, he never stops to ask himself why he is working so hard and depriving himself of the opportunities to enjoy life shared with a loved one. He never stops to think that he has no one to share and enjoy his wealth with or to inherit it after he dies.

“This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore [sad; miserable] travail [occupation; task]” – Solomon states how pointless it is to work so hard to accumulate wealth when you have no one to enjoy it with or to leave it to after you die. He says that this is a miserable way to spend your life.

9 Two *are* better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. 10 For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him *that is* alone when he falleth; for *he hath* not another to help him up.

“Two are better than one” – In contrast to the man working alone, Solomon declares that two people working together in partnership is better than one man alone. This can apply to business partners, friendship, or to a marriage.

“because they have a good reward for their labour” – Two can accomplish more working together than two working individually. They can also obtain more satisfaction in their work when they can share the benefits of their accomplishments.

“For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow” – Another benefit of two working together comes from being able help each other when they “fall.” When problems and mishaps come, two can more easily recover since the strength of one can help the other when he is weak.

“but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up” – The one who is alone has no one help him when problems and mishaps occur.

11 Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm *alone*? 12 And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Solomon gives us more illustrations showing that it is better to not be alone.

“Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone?” – The illustration comes from a man and his wife in cold weather. Their combined body heat will help them stay warm much better than if they were each sleeping alone.

“And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him” – A man who is by himself might be overwhelmed by an attacker. However, if he has someone else alongside him then the two will be able to defend themselves against their assailant.

“and a threefold cord is not quickly broken” – A rope made of three strands will be much harder to break than one made of a single strand. The idea Solomon is emphasizing is that we are stronger as a group than as individuals. Predators often prey on animals that have separated themselves from the herd since they are easier to kill individually than when they are together.

13 Better *is* a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished. 14 For out of prison he cometh to reign; whereas also *he that is* born in his kingdom becometh poor. 15 I considered all the living which walk under the sun, with the second child that shall stand up in his stead.

“Better is a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished [to be warned; taught]” – Solomon compares two individuals. The first has two handicaps: he is poor and he is a child. However, he is wise. The second individual has two advantages: he is old and he is a king (implying that he is also wealthy). Being old, this king should have been wise but his handicap is that he is foolish. His foolishness is evident because he thinks he has nothing to learn and no one can teach him anything. Thus the poor but wise child is in a better situation than the old and foolish king.

“For out of prison he cometh to reign” – Solomon is referring to the poor but wise child who leaves prison to become a king. Perhaps he was thinking of Joseph whom God raised in one day from being a prisoner to being second only to Pharaoh on the throne of Egypt. Or he may have been thinking of his father, David, who was a fugitive running for his life from Saul before God exalted him to be king.

“whereas also he that is born in his kingdom becometh poor” – In contrast to this child destined to become king, the heir to the old king’s kingdom, perhaps because of his own sin or foolish decisions, is destined to become poor. A king’s kingdom is not guaranteed.

“I considered all the living which walk under the sun, with the second child that shall stand up in his stead” – Solomon’s observation sees the people (“all the living which walk under the sun”) turn their favor to the “second child” that replaces the old king. This “second child” could be the old king’s son or the poor but wise child that eventually becomes king.

16 *There is* no end of all the people, *even* of all that have been before them: they also that come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also *is* vanity and vexation of spirit.

Solomon comments on the fickle nature of public opinion. Just because the current generation (“all that have been before”) favors the king, it doesn’t mean that the next generation will (“they also that come after”). The people may love the king today but tomorrow they may not. Solomon finds this to be a situation as pointless as chasing after the wind.