

Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:6

Wickedness in History

A. Wickedness Described

Whatever can be observed under the sun clashes with the conviction that God's holy will is present in all that happens. The Teacher returns to his old theme (cf. 1:15). Instead of justice and righteousness, there is wickedness. The place of justice is the place of the courts, government and administration. This was so especially in Jerusalem, where the thrones of the house of David had been set (Psalm 122). But now foreign officials and perhaps even Jewish collaborators constitute the service there (cf. 8:10).

It is not certain whether "the place of righteousness"[RSV] denotes the temple. Our book points to deformation around the worship service (5:1-7; cf. Nehemiah and Malachi), but there are no indications that there was wickedness in that time. We would prefer to think of a general violation of the law, which would also include everything which has a set and appointed time.

Ch. 4:1 comes back to this. There are in the first place the tears of the oppressed, who have no comforter to help them obtain justice. Besides, the power is with the oppressors. This is the problem with which the suffering church of all ages is faced. In the east (and unfortunately also in Israel), oppression and exploitation of the poor was quite common (cf. Job 24, and the numerous protests of the prophets). It is understandable therefore, that when The Teacher looks at things from a human point of view, he counts the dead and the unborn as fortunate. At least they do not see the evil deeds that are done under the sun!

The common envy, of which chapter 4:4 speaks, reminds us strongly of the situation of Israel which was subjected to a foreign power. People fight constantly for their positions, and many try to be pleasers of men. It is a dreary image: all the toil and diligence are really jealousy of the one towards the other. It is all envy and rivalry, and there is no justice.

Is man then supposed to sit with folded arms? Of course not: such a fool ruins himself. But whoever exerts himself beyond the usual does the same thing. That is why it is best that everyone (in the church) calmly performs his own task. Undoubtedly, the background behind this conclusion is expressed in chapter 3:17: everything has its appointed time, and the Judge is on his way.

B. Wickedness Tolerated

God has appointed a time for every matter and for every work, even for wickedness (3:17). It follows, then, that God holds all things firmly in his hands. That God permits injustice to exist for a long time because he wants to get as much evil out of man's heart as is in it, is certainly a Scriptural concept (cf. Revelation 22:11). However, that is not the idea expressed here. The Teacher speaks in the gathering of the congregation. God wants

to test the sons of man who belong to the church, to see whether they revere him (3:14). They must realize that in all things they are dependent on God and that, of themselves, they are beasts. The phrase, "as for men" (v. 18), is clearly a qualification. People are not put on the same level as beasts. But the point is that man and beast both have the same breath. They are born, they live here a moment and they die. They go to one place, the grave. Both are from the dust, and both return to dust again. The conclusion must be that the people in the *church* must be convinced of their insignificance, and must wait for the revelation of God's justice (cf. Psalm 37).

Man and beast have the same breath, which comes from God and is taken by God (Psalm 104:29). Who knows whether the spirit of man rises upward and the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth? This question does not mean that this is also a question for The Teacher. Nor is it a denial of the better lot which awaits the believer after death. The question only accentuates the fact that no one can answer this question apart from revelation. The question has the character of a riddle, and like every riddle, it wants to stimulate, to make one consider it and, in this case, to lead us to the revelation (see 12:7). Such stimuli, or goads (see Ecclesiastes 12:11, where the sayings of the wise are called goads), occur frequently in this book, and it is worthwhile to take careful note of them.

The conclusion is that man must devote himself to his work, and enjoy it *if* that is his lot (v. 22)¹. Man should not look further, for who brings him so far that he can see what will happen after his death? God will do justice in this age, or else in the messianic age, but that could still take a long time. We will probably not live to see it. In this way the believer continues to live, being weighed down by injustice. In this way, the Old Testament church really learns to long for the coming of the Lord on the earth!

C. Wickedness Condemned

The Teacher appears to be forecasting an uncertain future in this passage. But in fact he demands faith in God's revelation, without excuse. Therefore: wait for the end of God's ways, for judgment is coming (3:17).

There is a great difference between man and beast (cf. Genesis 1:26-30; 2:7,19,20). One day God will also separate man and man (cf. Psalm 49). In Psalm 49, the writer speaks about the rich fools, who, with all their pomp, are like the beasts that perish. Note that we are dealing here with a so-called chokmatic psalm (*chokma* = wisdom), which belongs to the same literary style as Ecclesiastes.

On Easter it was revealed that God does justice: Christ was proved to be in the right, wickedness was condemned. That gives perspective to our work (1 Corinthians 15:58, 2 Corinthians 5:1-10). The book of Ecclesiastes shows us that our work is not in vain, provided we do it through faith in the calling given to us by God (11:1-6).

¹ *Ed. Note:* The author deviates slightly from the NIV translation of this verse.

Questions

1. In chapter 3:16 we read about the dominion of wickedness, right in the place of justice and righteousness. How did our Saviour suffer under this? (cf. John 18:22,33; 19:13ff.) What consequences did this have for the church?
2. The Old Testament church would comfort itself with the thought: judgment is coming. What is the difference between its position and our, the New Testament congregation? Can we say that our faith has received a broader basis through Christ's coming and his work of salvation? In this context, a few remarks:

We still walk by faith, not by sight (1 Corinthians 5:7). Christ has conquered death, but the dethroning of the last enemy must yet come (1 Corinthians 15:25-28). We have received the Holy Spirit as a pledge of the eternal glory, but through that same Spirit we sigh, longing for the redemption of the cosmos (Romans 8:18-30).

3. What do we mean by "social criticism"? On the grounds of chapters 3:15, 4:1 (also 8:10), can you call The Teacher a forerunner of today's social critics? Did he want to overthrow the existing order? (cf. 5:8; 8:2; 10:4)
4. Do you know psalmists who also complain about the triumph of wickedness (in the world and in the church)?
5. When talking about God's work in history, men sometimes use the image of a piece of embroidery. God sees the top of it, and knows what he does. We only see the bottom: the threads crisscross each other and we cannot discern a pattern in it. What do you think of this image? Do you think it does justice to the reality of God's covenant with his people? Has God not told us much, and even explained much to us ahead of time, even though we can never comprehend God's work from the beginning to the end?

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