

Dust in the Wind

The Tale of Two Troubadours

Ecclesiastes 3:11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.

¹² I perceived that there is nothing **better** for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live;

¹³ also that everyone **should eat** and drink and take pleasure in **all his toil**-- this is God's gift to man.

¹⁴ I perceived that **whatever God does** endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.

¹⁵ That which is, **already has been**; that which is to be, **already has been**; and God seeks what has been driven away.

¹⁶ Moreover, I saw **under the sun** that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.

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

¹⁸ I said in my heart with regard to the **children of man** that God is testing them **that they may see** that they themselves are but beasts.

¹⁹ For what happens to the children of **man** and what happens to **the beasts** is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and **man** has no advantage over **the beasts**, for all is vanity.

²⁰ **All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.**

²¹ Who knows whether the spirit of **man** goes upward and the spirit of **the beast** goes down into the earth?

²² **So I saw** that there is nothing better **than that a man** should rejoice **in his work**, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

^{ESV} **Ecclesiastes 4:1** Again I saw all the oppressions that are done **under the sun**. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them.

² And I thought the dead **who are already** dead more fortunate than the living **who are still** alive.

³ But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds **that are done** under the sun.

⁴ Then I saw that **all toil** and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

⁵ The fool folds his hands **and eats** his own flesh.

⁶ **Better** is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

(Ecclesiastes 3:11-4:6)

Dust to Dust: A Tale of Two Men

One man was born in 1951. **The other** in 1949. One grew up in a small Indiana town. The other in a town in Kansas. Both are from the heartland of America, far away from the progressivism and crime, the culture and rot of the coasts; both close enough to the Bible-belt to certainly have been deeply influenced by it as youngsters. One man was “**taught the fear of Jesus**” in a legalistic Nazarene sect which “**manhandled**” into attending. The other learned the Name in the Lutheran church.

Both men **rebelled deeply** against whatever religious upbringing they were given. In their teenage years, each would pursue a career in music. Both became songwriters. One went solo; the other joined a band. The solo artist was forced by the record companies to change his name to “Cougar.” The other named his band after his home state of Kansas.

Both men were **thinkers**. Everyone’s heard “**a little story, about Jack and Diane,**” but John Mellencamp has many more hit songs, songs that explore exposing what’s wrong in this world. I was recently listening to his *Words and Music Greatest Hits Disc 1*, trying to get into his head a bit more. I was struck by how each of the first eleven songs lays them out so clearly. It begins **like listening to someone read Ecclesiastes**, a book that he sings and writes about on a consistent basis.

*Somewhere out in the distance
Is the death of you and me
Even though we don’t think of it much
It’s still out there for us to see¹*

¹ **John Mellencamp**, “Walk Tall,” *Words and Music: John Mellencamp’s Greatest Hits*, Island (2004).

The songs go on to explore the “**little pink houses**” of the American dream, you know, with people like that *black man, with a black cat, livin’ in a black neighborhood, whose got an interstate running’ through his front yard, you know he thinks he’s got it so good.*² It moves to the rain on the **scarecrow** and blood on the plow, as he thinks about the small farmer’s plight with *the crops we grew last summer that weren’t enough to pay the loans, couldn’t buy the seed to plant this spring and the farmer’s bank foreclosed. So he called his old friend schepman up to auction off the land. He said John it’s just my job and I hope you understand.*

He saw long ago in “**Love and Happiness**” that *they raise the price of oil and they censor our mouths. If you are a young couple today forget buying a house. And we wage our wars in the neighborhoods. We kill the young to feed the old and men that ain’t no good. And love and happiness have forgotten our names.* One song, “**Paper in Fire,**” is directly inspired by **Ecclesiastes 7:5-6**, “**It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the song of fools. For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fools.**”

Every single song had some kind of social commentary, be it on being **lonely** and seeking the arms of a strange

² The next songs I reference are, in order: “Pink Houses,” “Scarecrow,” “Love and Happiness,” “Paper in Fire,” “Lonely Old Night,” “Peaceful World,” “Human Wheels.” All are in the first 11 tracks on *Words and Music*.

woman, something apparently Solomon did a lot, to commenting on the hypocrisy of men in various aspects of life in this “Peaceful World,” and I could have gone on. Many of Mellencamp’s songs are like this. That’s why I love him. He sees the world for what it is and is incredibly gifted at diagnosing and showing us our problems. But I stopped at the eleventh track because in this song, “Human Wheels,” Mellencamp alludes to one of the other best-known verses of Ecclesiastes 3, which is from our passage today.

The lyrics were actually not his but came from a friend who had helped him write several of his hits. This friend had penned these words as a poem for his beloved grandfather’s funeral. John told his friend that this was the best song he had written yet. He responded that it wasn’t a song. Mellencamp said, “It will be now,” and he proceeded to turn it into what I take as a dialogue between him and his recently deceased grandfather, as the narrator’s voice moves back and forth between normal sound to a filter that makes the voice sound like it is echoing from somewhere beyond the grave.

The key line is, “*The dust to which this flesh shall return, it is the ancient, dreaming dust of God.*” This alludes to Ecclesiastes 3:20, “All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return.” This lyric is similar to one penned by our other

artist, [Kerry Livgren](#). Livgren had been on a quest for the meaning of life, much like Solomon. But he had rebelled against his upbringing every bit as much as Mellencamp. He talks about how he tried basically every religion known to man. At one point, he was reading through some Native American Indian poetry and out came the lyrics to Kansas' most famous song, a song which sounds just like our verse; the tune of which his wife had urged him to turn into a song, as it originated simply in a finger-picking exercise he had created to learn the Travis Pick.³

*I close my eyes
Only for a moment, and the moment's gone
All my dreams
Pass before my eyes, a curiosity
Same old song
Just a drop of water in an endless sea
All we do
Crumbles to the ground, though we refuse to see
Dust in the wind.
All we are is dust in the wind.*⁴

³ A summary of the song and how it came into being is found at [Laura B. Whitmore](#), "Kansas's Kerry Livgren on Dust In The Wind: 'When I Played it for the Band, There was Stunned Silence,'" *Guitar World* (Aug 21, 2019), <https://www.guitarworld.com/acoustic-nation/acoustic-nation-kansas-ken-livgren-shares-story-behind-dust-wind>. On the use of Ecc 1:3-4, 14, 3:20 in the song see [Elif Ozden](#), "The Bible References That Kansas Used in 'Dust In The Wind,'" *Rock Celebrities* (Dec 12, 2021), <https://rockcelebrities.net/the-bible-reference-that-kansas-used-in-dust-in-the-wind/>.

⁴ [Kansas](#), "Dust in the Wind," *Point of Know Return*, Woodland Studios (1978).

Not exactly hopeful, but as he says in one interview many years later, *still true*.

Ecclesiastes 3:11-4:6 – Context and Structure

According to one person's way of looking at our passage, the verse upon which these lyrics about dust are based, are *its very center*.⁵ When I decided to preach 3:1-11 last time, I did so at least in part based on an idea that there was a chiasm between 3:12 and 4:6 which centered upon this verse. Upon further reflection, while I think that this was a nice effort, at the end of the day, I've come to think that his structure singles out too many words that are repeated in other parts of the same text where they are not singled out. This makes it too arbitrary and for that reason, I am not yet convinced that we have such a thing going on in this passage.

However, what his exercise demonstrates is that *the Hebrew mind of our Preacher is thinking in circles* (all chiasms do this to some degree, as they return in on themselves). And what he is doing in this passage is a series of reflections and observations about things that he sees.

⁵ See *Nigel*, "Ecclesiastes 3:12-4:6," *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* (Jan 21, 2015), <https://www.chiasmusexchange.com/2015/01/21/ecclesiastes-312-46/>.

Something that he has “seen” is a theme we have seen a little of thus far in the sermon (1:14; 2:13, 24). It will become a drumbeat that will continue through ch. 10. In our passage, he “sees” four different things that he wants to point out, and this does not count 3:10 that we looked at last time, part of which I include today for reasons that will become clear later.

- “I have seen...” (3:10)
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- “Moreover, I saw under the sun...” (3:16)
 - “So I saw that...” (3:22)
 - “Again I saw...” (4:1)
 - “Then I saw that...” (4:4)

He sees wickedness in the world that is done under the sun (3:16ff), oppression in the world (4:1ff), and toil that is motivated by envy (4:4-6). Wickedness, oppression, and toil—this is right up Mellencamp’s alley. These three make for a series of especially depressing observations about our world as it regards man’s inhumanity to his fellow man. The remaining “see” is a conclusion of two reflections that come from the first thing that he saw. These two reflections are highlighted by what he “said in my heart” (17, 18). The first is that God will judge the righteous and the wicked, because

“there is a time for every matter,” showing us that he is still commenting upon the poem at the beginning of the chapter. The second is a reflection from God showing us that we men are but animals who go to the same place as animals, and it is in this section where we find the comments on dust.

In this way, we can outline the passage as follows:

- I. **Observation: I saw** -- the business God has given us to be busy with (3:10-11)
 - A. Reflection: Be joyful and do good (12)
 - B. Reflection: Eat and drink and take pleasure in toil as God’s gift (13)
 - C. Reflection: Whatever comes from God endures so that people fear him (14)
 - D. Reflection: on time (15)
- II. **Observation: I saw** -- Wickedness in the place of justice (3:16)
 - A. Reflection: God will judge the righteous and the wicked (3:17)
 - B. Reflection: God is showing people that they are but animals (3:18-21)
 - C. **Conclusion: I saw** -- there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work (3:22)
- III. **Observation: I saw** -- Oppressions (4:1)
 - A. Reflection: Lack of comfort of oppressed or oppressor (4:1b)
 - B. Conclusion: the dead are more fortunate than the living (4:2)
- IV. **Observation/Reflection: I saw** -- toil and envy (4:4)
 - A. Reflection: The Evil Eye (4:4-5)
 - B. Conclusion: Better is a handful with quiet (4:6a)⁶

⁶ Shortened, adapted, modified from **Sidney Greidanus**, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 75, 91.

Three Depressing Observations

Dust in the Wind: Wickedness in the Place of Justice (3:16-22)

We will begin in **3:16**. “Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.” “Under the sun” is a change from “under heaven” (includes all creation) at the beginning of the chapter and a return to what we saw earlier in the Preacher’s sermon. It is the narrowing of the focus from all things done under heaven to the things that men do to their fellow man, especially as they focus on themselves and take no regard for God.⁷

What is the setting of this observation? It seems to be **the courts**, for this “**the place of justice.**” The Preacher sees that the **courts do not render just verdicts** but often those that are the opposite. He will return to this in **4:1** where he sees how men oppress one another and that the oppressors have all the advantages. Now, some think that because Solomon is the king, this could not possibly have been written by him, for it was his job as the king to make the courts just. But this

⁷ **T. M. Moore**, *Ecclesiastes: Ancient Wisdom When All Else Fails: A New Translation and Interpretive Paraphrase* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 11.

gives way too much power to one man. Not even a king can control all the secret plots and conspiracies that go on to corrupt systems of justice. He's just one man. Besides, Solomon is saying this at the end of his life, not in the middle, after his heart went astray, when he very possibly didn't care like he should have about this very thing.

Luther seems to be on track in the proper interpretation. He says the Preacher is “**not complaining because there is wickedness in the place of justice but because the wickedness in the place of justice cannot be corrected.**”⁸ This would make sense of **Solomon** not caring earlier, but now caring at the end, when it is too late to correct it. We live in a country that was fortunate enough to have a fresh start, not once, but twice—first when the Pilgrims started brand new colonies, and second when our nation was formally established and the Constitution was fresh and unstained. **The Founding Fathers** did as much as they could think of to ensure that their system of justice would be to the advantage of the oppressed. In one way or another, our entire Bill of Rights (not privileges, but rights) were aimed at protecting this very thing:

⁸ **Martin Luther**, “Notes on Ecclesiastes,” in *Luther's Works*, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 56 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 15:56.⁸

- (1) The right to freedom of speech and the press and assembly and petition are preserved so that people might be free to learn moral principles and act upon those to keep the most oppressive of all institutions—government—in check. And remember, courts are nothing but the extension of the strong arm of the government.
- (2) The right to bear arms preserves our ability to defend ourselves against a tyrannical government.
- (3) Citizens do not have to house soldiers, thus keeping intimidation of the government far from home.
- (4) The government cannot unreasonably search or arrest you. Now we are moving specifically at the court system. For if you are arrested, you go to court.
- (5) Double jeopardy cannot be applied to a defendant, and you cannot be forced to testify against yourself.
- (6) You have the right to a fair and speedy trial and to be informed of charges against you.
- (7) You have the right to a trial by a jury of your peers.
- (8) Excessive bail and fines are forbidden.
- (9) You have other rights that are not spelled out in the Constitution.
- (10) The Federal Government does not have powers other than what are spelled out in the Constitution and other matters belong to the states or the people.

It is astonishing to me that some people want to overthrow these right in the name of social justice! Reading these and understanding them, it is almost like the Fathers were reading Ecclesiastes and trying their best to ensure justice would roll down like rivers. The problem, of course, is that **what is crooked cannot be straightened**, the heart of man is crooked, and once he decides he doesn't care about such laws, all bets are off, as we are seeing play out today in so many court decisions around the country and the world. As Ryken asks, **“When the halls of justice become corridors of corruption, where can righteousness be found?”**⁹ It is a terribly sad commentary on humanity that the normal state of things in (especially) large, modern nations is that wickedness rules in the place of righteousness. And when we feel the force of this personally, we realize the timeliness of the Preacher's observation.

The Preacher then **reflects upon it**. **“I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is at time for every matter and for every work” (17). He is not a Godless man.** He knows that justice is coming and that no one will escape his judgment. This saying takes the **“time for everything”** and moves it beyond our lives into **the life to**

⁹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 100–101.

come. Some of you love this truth and rest in it, because you see that even while justice is wrecked upon a rocky shore under the sun, it will not be so in eternity. You know that God has already judged your sins ... in Christ, and so this is a blessed hope in which you take solace. Others of you refuse to acknowledge this truth. **It is one that continues to escape Mellencamp in all his anger.** But denial of it isn't going to make it go away. I'll come back to that later.

His **second reflection upon this injustice** causes us to consider something that many of us do not. It is strangely related. "I said in my heart with regard to the children of man (*adam*), that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts" (18). It seems like the Preacher is an evolutionist! Is he saying that we are all just animals? No, not in the sense that a Richard Dawkins would. In fact, he never says God will judge animals like he has just said he will just men. We are distinguished.

And yet, there is **something about us that is the same as animals.** Going back to Genesis 1-2, it is called "**the breath of life**" (*nephesh*). Animals have it. We have it. It allows us to be alive, together, on God's earth. It is what gives us the ability to think and to various degrees, reason and have emotions, and so on. Those who think that animals do not

have these things have not been around them enough. They think too low of God's amazing creatures.

But it isn't our biology that is particularly in mind here. Rather, it is **our destiny**, and this is how it fits with the previous reflection about God judging at a later time. "For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity" (19). As much as earlier people sought the Fountain of Youth or modern people freeze their bodies so that science can revive them, or transhumanists seek to live forever through technology, at the end of the day, **no one escapes this reality**. You are not going to escape this reality. You will die. And his point is that this makes you no different from a cow or a dog. They can't escape death, and neither can you.

He calls this **vanity**, and it is just here that **his thoughts begin to spiral** downward, almost out of control. It is the same thing that happened to Mellencamp and to Livgren as they wrote their songs. It happens to so many who are seeking truth in this world **through natural revelation**. "All go to one place. All are from dust, and to dust all return" (20). Of course, this idea also comes from Genesis,

particularly 2:7, “Then the LORD God formed the man of *dust from the ground*” and 3:19, “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and *to dust you shall return.*” The Preacher is forcing you to **consider what you are and where you will go**. Indeed, he has said that *God is forcing you to do this*—as a test. This is why there is injustice allowed to continue in the system, for it is a reflection upon this observation. Will you **acknowledge what is inevitable** for you and act upon it properly, or will you spend your life pursuing a fool’s errand that will do nothing but end you up at the same finish line anyway? That would truly be vanity. At least be as wise as Mellencamp and Livgren were by confronting the inevitable. At least do that!

It is at vs. 21 that it **gets very bleak**. “Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?” Many are quick to use special revelation to answer this question—*about man*. But the Preacher isn’t using that here, because he is looking at the question from the perspective of what is done under the sun rather than what God has revealed through his prophets. Don’t move too quickly past this, for *in this respect*, who can know? The answer is, not even you can know. According

merely to what your eyes see, it is an utter mystery. At the same time that we are so quick to answer the human destiny with special revelation, I know many think they know **the answer regarding animals**. They confidently assert that when animals die, they don't go anywhere! My response is always, "**How do you know that?**" You didn't read that in the Bible. It isn't in there. Did you figure that out by looking at things done under the sun? The Preacher tells you that is impossible. Do you think you know more than he does? Maybe you do.

What the Preacher is doing for those who don't know all these things is forcing us to ask the same **existential question** he is. "**Who knows? Can we really be sure? How can we know for certain that after we die, we will go to Heaven and live with God?**"¹⁰ Looking merely at this world, it just isn't possible.

Given that this is where his inquiry has taken him, **he concludes with his third observation** on joy in the sermon. It is also something he "**saw.**" "**So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?**" (22). This is the same as he says in **vv. 12-13**, "**I perceived**

¹⁰ Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 105.

that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man” (12-13). Given that he couldn’t figure out the answer to this riddle by looking at what is done under the sun, his conclusion is perhaps the most vapid of the joys. If you don’t know what’s going to happen when you die, you might as well **enjoy life now**. And yet, while it may not seem like much of a conclusion, he is trying to get you to understand that because God has hidden his purposes in darkness (**vs. 11**), why not look to the things he has not hidden. And just because you do have special revelation regarding eternity, it does not therefore destroy the point about joy in this life now. In fact, it only reinforces it. If the one who looks only to this world can enjoy God’s creation now, how much more should the Christian?

Better off Dead: The Oppressed and Oppressor (4:1-3)

Having looked at justice and the wicked and considered the destiny of man, he turns his gaze to a new, but related, problem. “**Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun**” (4:1a). This is related to the former

observation and the one that comes after, and as we read them, it becomes clear that he is looking at the world the way so many do, with honesty at **the corruption and abuse and wickedness** of men and wondering what sense it all makes. It is the church's business to expose such darkness, but too often, she avoids the problems altogether.

He focuses on **the abused**. “**And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them**” (1b). It is perhaps this observation that has driven all Christian attempts at **social justice**, be they righteous and biblical or deeply perverted forms of reverse discrimination and hypocrisy.¹¹ It is disturbing to behold true oppression and to see the cries of those beaten down, who have lost everything, whose family has been killed, who have been sexually and emotionally abused, who have been forced to watch unspeakable horrors in the innocence of their childhood. **All decent people want to do something** to help

¹¹ The idea of “social justice” has been taken over by Marxists and Christians who have bought into that philosophy as a faithful expression of Christianity have been using it for decades. It is deeply perverted in our day, but it has not always been so. For example, a tract in *The Evangelical Magazine* (1794, Vol. 2) says, “... but I wish to remind the professor of evangelical truth, that unless his faith lead him to the love of social justice, he is deceiving his own soul, if he suppose himself made a partaker of the faith of Christ. *For this is the will of God—that no man go beyond, or defraud his brother in any matter; because that the Lord is the avenger of such.* 1 Thes. Iv. 6.—*Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.* Phil. Iv. 8.”

them. But the recognition here is that **you can't help them all**. And most end up with **no comfort** from their hurt. This is the way of it. And the Preacher is sorry we must see these things.¹²

He turns to **the oppressed**. “**On the side of the oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them**” (1c). This verse has two possible meanings. First, “**no one to comfort them**” is repeated. Using synonymous parallelism, the grammar most likely refers to the oppressed again. This would show just how upsetting the oppression is to the Preacher. He cares deeply about it.

However, it could also mean that *the oppressors* have no one to comfort them.¹³ Let's look at **Solomon**. During the days of the building of the temple, he conscripted “**forced labor**” to build God's house (1Kg 9:15). In other words, he was an oppressor. This was so upsetting to the people of Israel (the North), that when **Rehoboam** came to power, they pleaded with him make their yoke lighter than his father's. He would not listen, but only doubled down, thus creating the rebellion of Jeroboam, which divided the kingdom in half (1Kg 12:2ff). Looking back on it, it is

¹² **Michael Fox**, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, p. 201.

¹³ I did not find anyone taking this view, but Michael Emadi tells me this is a possible reading, though it would be unusual. In fact, he says it is highly unlikely.

probable that Solomon felt the guilt of his oppression. It is a sad yet obvious fact that the oppressed need comfort. But the oppressor? Why would he need comfort? Is it because of his sin? How about the loneliness that drove him to such madness against his neighbor? The point is, he is as alone as the person he is oppressing and must live with himself.

The temptation here is to start talking about how wrong oppression is, to apply it to our context. But I fear that too much of our doing this would end up in a very different place than the Preacher. Therefore, let us think about his reflections on his own observation. “**And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive**” (2). Is this where you would have taken it? This isn't a comment on life in general, but life in relation to **the oppression that so destroys the human will to live**. As Tremper Longman summarizes it, we are **better off dead**.¹⁴ That, of course, must be read in light of what he has said about not knowing, *based on these observations alone*, what happens when we die. And surely, based on these things, he is right.

Does it bother you that he taking this in a way that you probably wouldn't? Does this reflection bother you? His

¹⁴ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 132.

conclusion appears bleak and nearly hopeless. Just here, we read **vs. 3**. “**But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.**”¹⁵ This bears certain affinities to **Job and Jeremiah**, each of whom come close to cursing the day of their birth because of the suffering they were brought to endure at the providential hand of God (**Job 3:3-5; Jer 20:18**). Hence, the NAS translation, “**The one who has never existed.**” But I see **a little hope** here. For the reflection isn’t on what the person has suffered and thus wished they had never been born, but on *the innocence* of the one who has not yet been born and how, perhaps, he won’t have to experience such oppression. Hence, the ESV and most translations, “**The one who has not yet been.**” It isn’t that he wishes no one would be born, but that he envies the one who hasn’t seen all this yet. The more knowledge, the more grief, as he said previously.

The Evil Eye: Toil and Envy (4:4-6)

Again, he turns his gaze to **a new yet related problem**. “**Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man’s envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and striving**

¹⁵ Longman, NICOT, 134.

after wind” (4:4). What is the meaning of this? There are two people in the verse: a man and his neighbor. A traditional interpretation is that “as people look at their neighbors, they work hard in order to keep ahead of them [or keep up with them]. [Since this never ends] His conclusion is that the cycle of jealousy leading to hard work and success is meaningless.”¹⁶ In this case, the neighbor is just minding his own business, while the man envying is being a fool (see next verse).

However, consider the probable context. The ancient world, including the Bible, has a few passages that hint at what is called *the evil eye*. This is “the belief that spiteful looks can damage one’s health, fertility, or property.”¹⁷ Galatians 3:1 says, “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” You can hear the demonic overtones in the language. “Bewitched” is the word *baskaino*, from which we get the noun basilisk! If you watch *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, or if you are familiar with the serpentine Medusa from Greek mythology, you know that one evil stare and you are doomed. In the ancient world and many places still today, people believe that “great harm might result from the

¹⁶ Longman, 136.

¹⁷ Nili Wazana, “A Case of the Evil Eye: Qohelet 4:4-8,” *JBL* 126.4 (2007): 693. https://www.academia.edu/1255220/A_Case_of_the_Evil_Eye_Qohelet_4_4_8_Journal_of_Biblical_Literature_126_4_2007_pp_685_702.

‘evil eye’ or from being looked upon with envious and malicious stares.”¹⁸ The key here is “envy,” for this is the very thing that is brought up in **Ecc 4:4**.

Now, in many translations (including the ESV), *envying results in meaningless toil*. He works hard, you want what he has, *so you toil* all your days trying to keep up with Mr. Jones. But it is equally possible that *envying comes from toil*. This is the way the KJV has it. “I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor” (**Ecc 4:4** NKJ). In this case, the neighbor works hard, and it causes you to envy, but this does not result in your hard work. Rather, *your envy turns to anger* because you don’t have what he has. This transpires because the neighbor is not wanting to share. How could we know that? Because the evil eye is usually giving towards such a person because he is accumulating wealth for his own profit and not for the benefit of others. When a person then envies such a man and gets angry, this is just the point of him then giving the hard worker *the evil eye*.¹⁹

This *lack of motivation* to work hard for yourself is related to **vs. 1**’s *lack of a comforter* because they are **all**

¹⁸ Spiros Zodhiates, “βασκαίνω,” *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, electronic ed. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

¹⁹ Wazana, 693.

alone. The work is a completely selfish pursuit that thinks only of itself.

This loneliness or solitary confinement is also related to vs. 5's very strange saying, "The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh" (4:5). Typically, this verse is thought to be a rather brutal metaphor of laziness that results in a kind of self-cannibalism—you won't work, so you will have nothing left to eat but yourself. But that doesn't make any sense in light of the interpretation given by the same people in the previous verse that the envy is actually causing him to work hard. The two verses are connected. Vs. 5 is the first of two reflections *on envy and work*. He isn't changing subjects; he is commenting on the same subject.

It is better to understand this verse as continuing the reflection of the great poem where "there is a time for embracing" (*chabaq*, Ecc 3:5). This man in view here is the worker. He is embracing *himself* (same Hebrew word). The idea is reflexive. "The fool embraces his hands/arms." Who is this fool? Not the man who is envying, but the man who is working hard. He is working hard for himself, not others. He is selfish and thus, alone. Eating the flesh is language that is further associated with the demonic overtones of the evil eye that are associated with the sickness that is thought to

come from it. If someone gives you the evil eye, “[you begin to] lose weight rapidly and eventually die.”²⁰ It’s a kind of eating of self. In this way, two are people actually working—*against one another*. One is working evil towards his fellow with whom he is envious and giving the evil eye while the other is working for himself, destroying the community and generating such terrible thoughts in others, thoughts that end up destroying everyone. This is a striving after wind!

This now makes sense of **vs. 6** and **his final reflection** which is in the form of a proverb: “**Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.**” This contrasts **an open hand** (associated with quietness and generosity) with **two closed fists**. Amazingly, **the open hand** is known as an antidote to the evil eye in North Africa and the Middle East. They had amulets that looked like open hands. If the rich would just open his hand towards others, he would be cured of the evil eye which is rotting away his own body, consuming him in selfishness and others in anger (see also **Ecc 4:8** and the man who will not share his fortune with anyone else).

²⁰ Ibid., 695.

Void in My Heart (4:4-6)

It is at this point that **our passage concludes**. We've seen three observations with his eyes that are incredibly negative and rather hopeless, with a couple of thoughts about God and a smattering of hope interspersed. But overall, the picture is bleak. The things man does to man are and always have been both wicked and vain. The Preacher has found **little to no answer** to his quest for the meaning of life by looking at things done under the sun. But then, how could he, given the truth of this abysmal condition?

It is just here that I wish to return to **Ecclesiastes 3:11**, a verse we ended on last time because of its tight connection to the poem on time. The verse says, **“He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”** The idea that everything is beautiful in its time is a statement that **can only come from a man who believes in God**, for it is God who has done this. Otherwise, what is beautiful about what we have seen today? The *judgment* of the wicked, yes. But can we even know if that will occur by looking under the sun? Rejoicing in our work? Sure, but that's only because what

else is there in our passage. Not yet begin born and the hope of a different future? Given the condition, it's not much of a hope.

But unlike the Preacher, **many don't believe in God**, especially not the God of the Bible. They have their reasons. They are too busy. They are too burdened. They are too angry. But they can't escape themselves or him forever. Mellencamp, for all his rebellion, knows it and that's why he sings about this verse too,

*There's a void in my heart I can't seem to fill.
I do charity work when I believe in the cause,
But in my soul it bothers me still.
Hey, Lord, you made me like I am;
Can you heal this restlessness?
Will there be a void in my heart
When they carry me out to rest?²¹*

John's void in his heart is Qoheleth's “**eternity in man's heart.**” It can be a **darkness**. It can be a knowledge of **emptiness**. It can be an impulse to seek what can fill it. Blaise Pascal, the famous 19th century mathematician and theologian called it a helpless craving of an empty print and trace of the infinite. He said,

²¹ **John Mellencamp**, “Void in My Heart,” *Big Daddy*, Mercury Records (1989).

What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.

(Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* VII [425])

These days it has been called a “heart-shaped vacuum.” All men have it. Someone called it being bound by time, but wired for eternity.²² Each of us are hard-wired for this and dare not ignore the question being posed here for long. C. S. Lewis said,

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.... I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others do the same.²³

²² Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 313.

²³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), p. 106.

Hence, Augustine famously began his *Confessions*, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you” (Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1).

This restlessness that is in us is paired with vs. 14. “I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him.” The point is, these things done under the sun are all here to lead you to God. And as the next verse says, these things happen over and over again so that you will continually be presented with this test. “That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away” (15).

So let’s return to our two troubadours. John Mellencamp is a brilliant analyzer of injustice and wrongdoing in this world. Billy Joel famously said at John’s induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame,

Stay ornery, stay mean. We need you to be [ticked] off and restless ... People are worried, people are scared, and people are angry. People need to hear a voice like yours to echo the discontent that’s out there in the heartland. They need to hear stories about it. They need to hear stories about frustration, alienation, and desperation. They need to know that somebody out there feels the way they do, in the small

towns and in the big cities ... Good and loud and clear, the way you've always been saying it all along.²⁴

I agree. They do need to hear it. But like Billy (a Jewish atheist), John **doesn't have answers**. You will search long and hard to find anything resembling a solution to these ailments in their music.²⁵ Just because you can analyze the problem, it doesn't mean you have any solution. Mellencamp *had* the solution in the palm of his hands, as he says in "Small Town," when he was "**taught the fear of Jesus in a small town.**" But he rebelled against the Lord and has not submitted to him kingship to this day. He is still restless. He still has that void in his heart.

This is light years away from Kerry Livgren. Kerry has quite a testimony about **coming to the end of himself**, giving up the battle as he calls it. It is a story he has told it countless times over the years. Essentially, he came kicking and

²⁴ **Billy Joel**, "Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction Speech," *Mellencamp.com* (Oct 8, 2010), <https://www.mellencamp.com/oldnews/rock-and-roll-hall-of-fame-induction-speech--3-10-08-#:~:text=We%20need%20you%20to%20be,scared%2C%20and%20people%20are%20angry>

²⁵ **Going Deeper**: John comes close in "Walk Tall." "**Bigotry and hatred are enemies to us all. Grace, mercy, and forgiveness will help a man walk tall.**" The problem is, what does he *mean* by these things? For earlier in the song he says, "**Be careful of those killing in Jesus's name. He doesn't believe in killing at all.**" Of course, there's truth here, and yet, "**there is a time to kill.**" And, "**No drunkards allowed in heaven. No sinners will get in.**" Again, true in one respect, not true in another. If you don't have these virtues first flowing out of personal grace and forgiveness from Christ, what do you have left? Words that come from the Bible that are void of all their meaning.

screaming, when he was finally given the Gospel by a fellow musician on a tour bus that he was riding, having given up his own seat on the chartered plane in order to talk philosophy and try to discover the meaning to life. Livgren had been doing the “**religion of the month club**” for years. and had now landed in a religion called **Urantiam**, a kind of philosophical, scientific, religious concoction of the early-mid 20th century. He was arguing with his Christian friend and found that he couldn’t win. He started becoming detached from his music and eventually left Kansas altogether. This was after, he says, he was **arrested by the Holy Spirit** who began convicting him of his sins and Christ’s true identity and Lordship. That vacuum shaped hole was being filled by the only One who can ever fill it. Kerry was brought to submission and now spends his days serving this great God because he has come to understand what I pray Mellencamp will one day know too, but hasn’t yet.

These two directions are really **the only two out there** when you finally understand the truth that you are but dust and to dust you will return. Thankfully, God has not left you to merely pursue the answers to the meaning of life by just looking at life under the sun. When you do that, there

is much despair and even being joyful in this life is a vanity. One of the reasons many don't enjoy life is because they simply do not know God through Christ. Do not squander what you hearing about the true hope that is in this world in Christ and be like both of these men who heard it themselves in churches growing up. For **you never know when you will return to the dust**, and it may be a lot sooner than you think. Instead, take hold of it.

Allow me to end with another song written by Livgren when he was still with Kansas. It is **a song he wrote to his wife**, after he had been saved by the Lord. It is a song calling her to pursue his calling and trust in the Savior too, something she eventually did, and they are still married all these decades later. The song is called "Hold On."

*Outside your door he is waiting
Waiting for you
Sooner or later you know
He's got to get through
No hesitation and no holding back
Let it all go and you'll know
You're on the right track
Hold on ...
'Cause it's closer than you think*

*And you're standing on the brink
Hold on²⁶*

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