

## LESSON 4

# There Must Be Something Better

### Scripture Focus

Ecclesiastes 3; 4

### Key Verse

“He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

### Overview

Solomon states that the sovereign God has determined everything that affects humans. Although the world seems unpredictable, God is in control of it. He has created humans with an insatiable thirst for what only He can give. This truth provides the necessary perspective for life in an apparently unjust world.

### Topic

God's sovereignty

### Theme

God gives humans an undeniable sense of the eternal.

### Desired Learner Response

The learner will trust God with specific areas of his or her life that are difficult to understand.

### Outline

- I. Principle (Eccles. 3:1–15)
  - A. Theme (3:1)
  - B. Illustrations (3:2–8)
  - C. Evaluation (3:9–11)
  - D. Application (3:12–15)
- II. Problems (Eccles. 3:16–4:16)
  - A. Injustice (3:16, 17)
  - B. Death (3:18–22)
  - C. Oppression (4:1–3)
  - D. Envy (4:4–6)
  - E. Loneliness (4:7–12)
  - F. Change (4:13–16)

### Materials

- **Transparencies 1 and 7**
- **Six note cards**
- **Old newspapers**
- **Whiteboard and marker**
- **Lesson 4 case study from resource CD**
- **Ecclesiastes 3:11 verse card from resource CD**

## Getting Started

Use one of the following activities to introduce the lesson.

### Problems of Life

Write the following problems of life on six note cards, one to a card: injustice, death, oppression, envy, loneliness, change. Distribute the six cards at random and help students form six groups, one for each card. Instruct each group to discuss and determine modern examples of its assigned problem.

**Discuss:** How do people respond to these problems? When you focus on these problems, how does life look? (Questions 1, 2)

In this section, Solomon began his second observation of life. He started by developing the principle that God is in control. This certainty should cause us to submit to Him and find hope.

### Newspaper Browse

Distribute sections of newspapers, particularly the front pages, to groups of four to six learners. Have them look at the headlines and browse a few articles. **Ask:** What problems did the newspapers report on? (Make a list on the whiteboard.) How do people respond to these problems? When we focus on these problems, how does life look? (Questions 1, 2)

## Searching the Scriptures

### I. Principle (Eccles. 3:1–15)

As Solomon began his second observation of life (3:1—5:20), he developed a key principle in Ecclesiastes 3:1–15. He stated it in verse 1, and then he illustrated, evaluated, and applied it.

#### A. Theme (3:1)

Solomon asserted that God has a plan that includes every person and all that people do at all times. The sovereign God has ordained everything in human affairs. Life may seem vain, because we cannot control what happens. However, God has appointed a season for every event in life, and there is a suitable time in God's plan for every purpose under the heavens.

**ASK:** What are the only two responses people can have to God's control of life? (Question 3)

This truth about God's sovereign control calls forth two responses: (1) hope and stability for the person willing to depend on God, and (2) hostility toward God's control. Solomon was moving toward his conclusion: Only submission to the sovereign God can bring meaning to life.

#### B. Illustrations (3:2–8)

**TRANSPARENCY:** Display transparency 7. **READ:** Have seven learners each read one verse from Ecclesiastes 3:2–8.

Solomon illustrated the range of God’s control by citing fourteen pairs of opposite activities. By stating the extremes, Solomon implied that God also controls everything between the extremes. Only God holds the key to life, and therefore, to human fulfillment.

Some have interpreted this passage as though it advised us to wisely choose the right timing for decisions. However, as 3:11 shows, God determines the suitable time of every human activity. The wise person fits into God’s plan.

In the face of human frustration with life (chaps. 1, 2), Solomon showed that, as Creator, God built His divine order into the world. He exempted nothing from His control. The activities included in verses 2–8 include everything from the moment of birth to the moment of death. All events, both the sublime and the mundane, fall under God’s control.

**TRANSPARENCY:** Display transparency 7. **ASK:** Which of the activities are mundane? Which ones have you experienced in the last week? (Questions 4, 5)

**C. Evaluation (3:9–11)**

After showing the range of God’s sovereign control, Solomon evaluated its significance. Once again, he asked the key question of the book and of life: “What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?” (v. 9). The contrasts in verses 2–8 revealed that one human activity cancels out another, leaving a net profit of zero. When life is viewed under the sun, there is no prospect for profit. Everything in life is under God’s control, so there is nothing that humans can do to change what God has determined.

Solomon concluded that God has designed even the wearisome and frustrating treadmill of life (v. 10). Everything fits His purpose.

**DISCUSS:** How does even a wearisome and frustrating existence fit God’s purpose? (Question 6)

Verse 11 is one of the most important verses in Ecclesiastes. God has made the world beautiful, that is, with an ordered pattern. We cannot always see this order because we are sinful and limited creatures. Nevertheless, God created us with a sense of eternity in our hearts, with an insatiable thirst for eternal things. Temporal possessions and thrills cannot truly satisfy our hearts. Each person senses that he cannot find meaning in his own achievements but that meaning must exist somewhere. This is why life under the sun, leaving God out of the picture, leads to frustration.

**TESTIMONY:** Ask for volunteers to share a personal testimony or someone else’s story of giving up



As we try with all our might to find satisfaction through our efforts, we repeatedly bump into the wall of our own inability. God designed this inability so that we would realize our inadequacies and cry out to Him for help. We are only creatures. If we are to find fulfillment in God’s world, we must call out to our Creator.

The phrase “he hath set the world in their heart” means that He has put eternity in their hearts.

temporal things in order to follow Christ. **ASK:** Were there ever any regrets for making such a decision? (Questions 7, 8)

#### D. Application (3:12–15)

Solomon reaffirmed the conclusion he had made in 2:24–26: Because God is in control, the best thing we can do is live joyfully within the boundaries established by Him. It is impossible for anyone to understand fully the mystery of life, for God has not made everything known to us. Nevertheless, that restriction should not prevent us from rejoicing in the life God has given or from doing what pleases God (3:12). We cannot understand life as much as we would like, but we still can accept life as God's good gift to us.

**READ:** Have a learner read Ecclesiastes 2:13. **ASK:** How should viewing life as a gift from God affect one's perspective on life? (Question 9)

Therefore, Solomon advised his readers to view life positively. Instead of despairing, they should delight. Instead of mourning, they should enjoy mirth. Instead of giving up, they should rejoice in the midst of their work (v. 13). God has given life as His good gift. Life is not a curse to avoid but a blessing to embrace.

**ASK:** How do you feel when you give a gift that is not appreciated? **DISCUSS:** What does a person's negative outlook on life say to God, the One Who gave him or her the gift of life? (Questions 10, 11)

Solomon came to the point that is fundamental to the whole book (v. 14). God has designed the world so that we cannot comprehend or control it. His purpose is to frustrate human pride, which tries to find fulfillment apart from God. As our efforts to make life satisfying fail, we have either to give up on life entirely or to submit to God. We can find our fulfillment in God's world only when we recognize who God is and acknowledge who we are—His dependent creatures.

God's ways are not the ways of humans, and His times are under His control alone (v. 15). He totally controls all of life. Therefore, we must fit into His order rather than think that God will bend to our desires. The world is completely under God's sovereign control, so life and joy can come only in His way.

**TRANSPARENCY:** Display transparency 7. **DISCUSS:** What are the results of rejecting God? What are the results of depending on God? (Record learners' answers on the transparency.) (Questions 12, 13)

Fulfillment does not result from freedom from God but from submission to His will. When we try to blaze our own trail, we lose our way. Only those



who submit each aspect of their lives to God's direction find the satisfaction that He alone can give.

## II. Problems (Eccles. 3:16—4:16)

God exercises sovereign control over all of life. In Ecclesiastes 3:16—4:16 Solomon looked at several problems that seem to argue that God is not in control. Solomon stated six problems and suggested an answer for each one.

### A. Injustice (3:16, 17)

As Solomon looked at life, he noted that wickedness often seems to triumph over justice (3:16). Often, the guilty not only get away with their sin, but they also oppress the innocent. This injustice seemed to deny the fact of God's sovereign control over life.

Solomon answered this problem in verse 17. When he considered God and the future, the picture changed dramatically. He perceived God as the judge of the world and all people, righteous and wicked alike, as having to answer before Him. He will reward those who faithfully submit to His rule, and He will punish those who defy Him by their disobedience and lawlessness. In His own time, God will settle all the scores of life.

**DISCUSS:** How might dwelling on injustices that are out of our control affect our lives? **READ:** Have a learner read Romans 12:17–21. **ASK:** What light does this passage shed on this topic? (Questions 14, 15)

### B. Death (3:18–22)

**READ:** Have a learner read Ecclesiastes 3:18–20. **ASK:** How are abortion, euthanasia, and assisted suicide related to the erroneous views in these verses? (Question 16)

The second apparent problem with God's sovereign control is that it appeared to Solomon that humans and beasts die in the same way. It seemed that for people and animals the present physical life is all there is (vv. 18–20). If that observation were accurate, then the inequities of life would be especially troubling because once a person dies, there would be no future.

The answer is in 3:21 and 22: There is a spiritual side to human life that is discernible only to God. God evaluates each person and determines each one's eternal destiny. We were made for eternity as well as for time. We are not just residents of earth; God created us to dwell in Heaven. In making us in His image (Gen. 1:27), He gave us a dignity far surpassing that of the animal world. Human life does not end at the grave, as it does for the beasts, but people will live throughout eternity.

Solomon again counseled his readers to enjoy life. Viewing life pessimistically is a sure way to squander it.

If you used the Problems of Life opening activity, then as each problem is introduced in the commentary have the corresponding group share their assigned problem and example(s) that they discussed in the introductory activity. If you didn't use the opening activity, then you may want to ask the learners for examples as you cover the problems.

**C. Oppression (4:1–3)**

The third problem that bothered Solomon was the oppression that he saw around him. In Solomon's day, as in ours, powerful men often used their power to take advantage of those who were weak, and they seemed to get away with that obviously unjust behavior. The oppressed seemed to have no comforter, no one to give them strength and support. They were helpless in the face of unfair, oppressive treatment. This certainly seemed to contradict the fact of God's sovereign control of the world.

Solomon responded by saying that this kind of life "under the sun" is worse than not having life at all (4:2, 3).

**ASK:** What historical examples of oppression would you rather die than have to face? (Question 17)

Without a relationship with God, a person has no comfort in the face of life's problems. Therefore, the dead are better off than those living without God. In fact, it is best not to be born than to have to face the cruelties of life in one's own strength and wisdom. Solomon said that death is not the worst thing.

**D. Envy (4:4–6)**

Solomon also considered the problem of intense competition, which leads to a spirit of envy. Within God's ordered world, diligent work customarily leads to prosperity, a good and praiseworthy pursuit. But often others envy the person who succeeds (4:4).

**EVALUATE:** People who fail often have more friends than those who are highly successful. (Question 18)

In light of the possibility of being envied for being successful, a person might be tempted to go to the other extreme and avoid work altogether. However, verse 5 shows that only a fool follows the self-destructive path of idleness.

In verse 6, Solomon gave the solution to the problem. He acknowledged that a spirit of competitiveness often leads only to frustration and disappointment. Working hard does not necessarily lead to fulfillment. It is better to relax a bit and be satisfied with a little than to be consumed by the drive to get more. After all, even if a person succeeds, he will be envied by others.

**E. Loneliness (4:7–12)**

Loneliness was the fifth problem Solomon analyzed. He observed that some people work industriously, giving up many pleasures and enjoyments, yet they have no one with whom to share the fruit of their labor (4:7, 8). Misers are not satisfied by their accumulated riches, for their lack of personal relationships impoverishes their lives. Inevitably they have to ask, "Why am I working so hard, when I have no one with whom to enjoy it?"

In verses 9–12 Solomon demonstrated the benefits of companionship. Teamwork provides a greater reward than an individual can achieve alone (v. 9). Three examples from life illustrate this. If one person falls, he is helpless

to lift himself up. He needs a friend to assist him (v. 10). One person lying alone can become cold, but two can keep each other warm (v. 11). A solitary person is vulnerable to attack, but two people have strength together; and three provide even more support for one another (v. 12).

The idea of the self-made person is highly overrated, Solomon concluded. Facing life alone may seem heroic, but the challenges of life require other people to help bear our burdens.

**TESTIMONY:** Under what circumstances have you sensed your need for other people the most? (Question 19)

**F. Change (4:13-16)**

The final problem consisted of the inevitability of change. Solomon drew a picture of two figures who were extremely different from each other: (1) a poor but wise child and (2) a foolish old king who refused to heed advice (4:13).

The child overcame his upbringing to become a king, but his place, too, was taken by another (vv. 14, 15). His popularity and power were just as uncertain as those of the king who preceded him.

In all human affairs change is bound to come. Change touches everyone. Because of this, we should not place our hope in the fickle popularity and uncertain allegiances of people but in God, whose control is unchanging. Only He can provide certainty in an ever-changing world.

**Making It Personal**

**Don't Fight, Trust**

God's control touches every area of our lives. He has controlled the past, He controls the present, and He will control the future. He knows and evaluates all our daily activities. He knows our every need, and he is sensitive to our every pain. No problem is too big for Him to handle or too small for Him to care about.

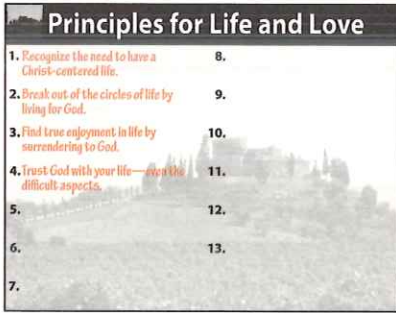
**Ask:** What in your life is difficult to accept and understand? How are you responding to God's sovereign control of your life? **Transparency:** Display transparency 7 to review the different results that come with the different responses to God's control.

Fighting God's control and looking for your own solutions to life is a losing battle. Trusting God with your life is the only true solution.

**Case Study**

Distribute the case study for lesson 4 to the learners. Have a learner read the case study. Use the questions on the case study to lead the learners in a discussion.





### Review Transparency

Use transparency 1 to review the Principle for Life and Love for this lesson: Trust God with your life—even the difficult aspects.

### Memory Verse

Distribute copies of the Ecclesiastes 3:11 verse card from the resource CD. Encourage the learners to memorize the verse.