

ECCL 2:24-3:22--THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

March 26, 1988

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A. Overview

2:24-3:22 show God's Sovereignty in the Cycles of Life (corresponding to 1:1-11). This section seems to have a basically chiasmic order, with the positive exhortations at both ends and at the middle. ABCACBA

1. A = "Enjoy life." 2:24-26; 3:12-13, 22.
2. C = "God-Given Frustration." 3:9-11, 14-15.
3. B = 3:1-8, 16-21. This is the least clear correspondence, but consider:
 - a) 17b: cf. vv.1-8.
 - b) Both emphasize that God has a use and purpose for both extremes of the world. The many opposites of 1-9 become the single dominant contrast of 16, righteous vs. wicked.
 - c) So we will call this section, "The God of the Extremes."

B. 2:24-26, "Enjoy Life."

Avoid the italics, and note that "for" should be "in" in v.24.

1. 24a, "There is nothing good in man." A summary of the previous sections. By his own efforts, man can do nothing worthwhile. Cf. Rom 7:18, For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing.
2. 24b. That man can eat, drink, and enjoy something in his labor is only possible by God's gift. The laughter of an unbeliever is a little crack in the fall, something that would not be there apart from divine intervention, and that will not be there in hell. Cf. Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17.
3. 25. Solomon's testimony. Realize who is saying this: the one person who more than any other could claim to lay hold on enjoyment by his own strength. For "hasten" translate "enjoy."
4. 26. The moral distinction. God treats the righteous and the sinner differently.
 - a) The righteous: gives him wisdom, knowledge, joy. Compare 21, "wisdom, knowledge, equity." Those three frustrate, but these are the portion of God's people. The righteous may not have success (which is what "equity" suggests in the Hebrew), but they will have "joy." (Cf. Philippians: can have this even in jail!)
 - b) The sinner: just what we have come to expect through the first part of the book. His is the life of vanity and chasing the breeze.

C. 3:1-8, "The God of the Extremes."

The world is neither black nor white; neither all sadness nor all happiness. It is fallen, but God still gives grace; redeemed, but still exhibits suffering. This distinction, introduced in 2:26, carries through here in 14 pairs of opposites, each of which is said to have its appropriate time in our world.

1. 2, life and death, in both animal and plant worlds. "be born" is literally "give birth."
2. 3, construction and destruction, both living and inanimate.
3. 4, joy and sorrow.
4. 5, conjugal love and abstention.
5. 6, profit and loss.
6. 7, mourning and normal life.
7. 8, friendship and animosity.

The bottom line is that you can't say, "If there were a God, he would do this or not do that." Everything that happens in the world has its place in his plan.

D. 3:9-11, "God-Given Frustration."

1. The puzzle: 9 echoes 1:3.
2. The answer, 10-11.
 - a) 10, God has given men this busyness. Echoes 1:13.
 - b) 11 tells in detail how he has done this:
 - 1) He has established a world complex enough that "everything is beautiful in its time." All the opposites of vv.2-8 fit somewhere, and where they fit, the opposite would be inappropriate. Men sense this; moral dilemmas take their root from it.
 - 2) He has put eternity [literal meaning of (oLaM] in men's hearts. Men know that they are meant for more than time, yet the inevitability of death means that they can never grasp that for which they reach.
 - 3) Thus men long to understand God's ways, but cannot. This is what drives them on their busyness.

E. 3:12-13, "Enjoy Life."

At the center of the chiasm, we return to the opening theme. Frustration is only appropriate if we limit our gaze to ourselves. God has better for us.

1. 12a, Man's miserable condition, modified. "There is no good in them," that is, in the sons of men (10,11), as in 2:24. This time, though, the exception is marked syntactically in the next clause:
2. 12b, Rejoice and do good. Cf. the first question of the Westminster Catechism: "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God [do good], and to enjoy him forever [rejoice]."
3. 13, God's gift enables this joy.
 - a) The same three elements as 2:24, "eat, drink, see good in

his labor."

b) The source: the gift of God.

F. 3:14-15, "God-Given Frustration."

Back to the issue of man's frustration with eternity ("for ever" = "to eternity"), as in 9-11. Two cycles in alternation.

1. Man's frustration:

- a) 14a, Man cannot augment or diminish God's work. God alone is sovereign.
- b) 15a, God has already determined what will be.

2. Its effect on the relation of God and man:

- a) 14b, Man's response to this realization of his limitation is to fear God.
- b) 15b, "God seeks that which is pursued," men in their busy course of activity. He watches over us and cares for us in the whirlwind in which he has placed us.

G. 3:16-21, "The God of the Extremes."

The "I saw" of 16 leads to two explanations ("I said in my heart") in 17 and 18-21.

1. Observation, 16. The contamination of righteousness with wickedness. It's bad enough for the world to be structured as in 1-8, with good and evil mixed together. But in fact it's fractal. Any portion of the world you care to consider shows this same mixture of good and evil. The lawcourts are perverted; even a righteous man shows sin.

2. First explanation, 17. God will one day bring judgment. Thus we need not lose sleep over the moral dilemma. Cf. 2 Thes. 1:6-10. The "time for everything" theme from 2-8 assures us that just as there is now a time for wickedness to be unchecked, so there will be a time for judgment.

3. Second explanation, 18-21. God wants to reveal their own beastly character to them. Even the unbeliever can see the injustice in the world, and thus should be driven to acknowledge the fact of sin, the first of the three things that every Christian needs to know. (The second is how to be saved, and the third is how to thank God for that salvation--Compendium of the Christian Religion.)

a) 18, The Summary.

God's purpose is to show men that they, taken by themselves (emphasis on "themselves") are beasts.

b) 19-20, The Common Observation.

They both die, and both turn to dust. This is modern man's assessment of man's place in the universe--he is just an animal. Death for each is the same!

- c) 21, The Crucial Difference that no one notices.
 - 1) Man's Spirit goes up to God (cf. 12:7).
 - 2) The Beast's spirit goes down into the earth.
 - 3) But no one notices the difference!

H. 3:22, "Enjoy Life.

- 1. The advice: "rejoice in one's work." Cf. also "portion," and compare 2:10, where this approach seems condemned. But there is a difference.
 - a) Here and elsewhere in the "Enjoy" sections, joy comes *in* work and labor. We are exhorted to find pleasure in the course of our activities.
 - b) There, the rejoicing and portion were *from* one's labor, the implication being that one is working toward a goal. But Qohelet's researches have shown that you can't guarantee reaching such a goal, so to count on it for one's satisfaction is frustrating
- 2. The reasons:
 - a) That is your portion, your share. You "deserve" it--not by merit, but because God has portioned it out to you, like your piece of cake on the dish. You must be satisfied with it, but don't be so foolish as to pass it by entirely.
 - b) You can't count on any future fame or accomplishment on this earth. Right now is all you have, so enjoy it.