

ECCL. 4:13-5:9, AUTHORITIES

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A. Introduction

1. The previous section (4:1-12) dealt with our relationship with our peers.
2. This one deals with those who are over us, either God (in the center) or the government that he has established (on either side).
3. The sections dealing with human government point out two faults of such systems. There is no fault with God's rule, in the center, but there we are warned of how we may inappropriately respond to it. Thus the whole section warns of problems that arise along the vertical dimension.
4. We will discuss the human rulers first, then go to the center for God's rule.

B. 4:13-16, The Two Kings

1. Problem: Transitoriness of human authority, for two reasons:
 - a) Power corrupts the governor. Being in a position of leadership makes a person less capable of leading, if he gets too big an opinion of himself!
 - b) Fickleness of those governed.
2. First problem, v.13: Power corrupts. This verse draws three contrasts that run counter to common sense.
 - a) Wise vs. foolish. Naturally, one wants wise rulers. Solomon especially appreciated this, and asked for wisdom at his inauguration. The point of the proverb is that wisdom is not always found where one expects it.
 - b) Poor vs. king. We tend to look up to riches, but it often happens that the poor is wiser than the rich. "God has chosen the poor of this world rich in faith," James 2:5.
 - c) Young vs. old. Even more surprising. Usually, wisdom comes with years. Cf.
 - 1) the differing counsel given by Rehoboam's older and younger advisors, 1 Kings 12:1-11;
 - 2) Isa. 3:4 cites youthful rulers as a political tragedy and a sign of judgment;
 - 3) place of "elders" as leaders both in Israel and in the NT.

But old age can lead to complacency. This king "no longer knows to be warned," has ceased to value the counsel of others and is wise in his own eyes. For such a person, age has become a liability rather than an asset.

3. v.14 illustrates the first problem.
 - a) Several ways to translate: I prefer, "For [the youth] came out of prison to reign, though he was born poor in [the old king]'s kingdom."
 - b) Illustrated by kings who came from political disfavor, symbolized by "prison"
 - 1) David, who though not imprisoned by Saul, was a political fugitive.
 - 2) Jeroboam, 1 Kings 11,12, exiled under Solomon.
 - c) In each case, the new king succeeds because the old king (Saul; Rehoboam) has become wise in his own eyes and incapable of ruling properly.
4. vv.15,16 illustrate the second problem, fickleness of the people.
 - a) "the second, the child." Reference here is to the new king.
 - b) All the people are "with the second," on his side. 16a echoes this: "There is no end of all the people, of all those before whom he is."
 - c) 16b shows that in spite of this great popularity, even this king falls out with the later generations.

C. 5:8-9, Bureaucratic Oppression

1. Problem: Bureaucratic injustice
2. v.8, The chain of oppression:
 - a) At the bottom, there is oppression and distorted rule.
 - b) That is, oppression at the lower levels only reflects what happens further up the ladder. "The high [one official] watches from above the high [another official]," guarding against the lower official taking his place, and seeking opportunity to strengthen his own position even more.
 - c) Even they have those above them.
3. v.9, the solution. Not no king, but a king with his priorities straight. Not "is served by," but "subjugated to." The king is devoted to the field, to agriculture. Suggests that the chain of bureaucratic oppression can only be broken if the king takes the lead in directing the land toward simple productive activities rather than war and programs.

D. 5:1-7, Living Before God

1. The problems we have seen with human rulers do not exist:
 - a) Oppression--God need not enrich himself by oppressing the poor! His absolute sovereignty removes any need for that.
 - b) Transitoriness--his eternity and holiness guarantees that he never enters his dotage.

But there are still problems in our relation with God--problems of our own creating. Qohelet focuses on three aspects of worship that are essential, yet damaging if pursued in the strength of the flesh. In each we have exhortation, followed by reason.

2. v.1, Sacrifice.
 - a) Exhortation: be cautious about sacrifice.
 - b) Reason: the word for "sacrifice" denotes one that the worshipper ate, leading to a party atmosphere. This kind of worship leads to carnal expressions, thus "they do evil."
 - c) NB: sacrifice is still commanded by the rest of scripture. Cf. the warnings about coming empty-handed, Deut. 16:16-17. Its importance is what makes its abuse so damaging.
3. vv.2-3, Prayer.
 - a) Exhortation: Don't be hasty or rash in what you say to God.
 - b) Reason: A prayer that rambles on as a hodge-podge of thoughts is no better than a dream that gathers together in random order the activities of the day. We will see the careful structure in biblical prayers, reflecting forethought and attention.
 - c) Again, prayer is a duty and a privilege. Impossible to "commit our way to the Lord," to "cast our care on him," to "make our requests known unto God," without prayer. Qohelet is not telling us to ignore it--that would be another fault. Nor should we be afraid to come to God. Just prepare for when we come. Don't just chatter like the finches.
4. vv.4-7, Vows (promises that if God does something, we will make an offering)
 - a) Exhortation: Be sure to fulfill your promises to God.
 - b) Reason: Fear God, and thus guard against offending him by an unfulfilled promise.
 - c) Vow never commanded, as prayer and sacrifice are. All the more reason to be careful about them. None recorded for the Lord Jesus, though Paul did one (Acts 18:18).

E. Summary

1. The problems of human government: transitoriness and injustice.
2. God's rule does not suffer from these problems. He never changes, and he does not oppress (enrich himself by taking advantage of the weak).
3. There, we must face our own responsibility in worship:
 - a) sacrifice for his pleasure, not our carnal desires;
 - b) carefully planned prayers;
 - c) great caution in vowing.