

The Book of Ecclesiastes

(The search for the ultimate maxim to explain the nature of life).



Chapter 3



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The book of Ecclesiastes occupies a unique position in the Bible due to its prevalent sense of pessimism and absence of God's intervention in our world. In fact, the all-prevailing mood of a God remote from our human condition sets the tone for Ecclesiastes which seems incongruent with the other books of the Old Testament. It contains reflections, more philosophical in nature, rather than a testimony of belief, which we would normally associate with the Hebrew scriptural tradition. For the traditional author, in the Book of Ecclesiastes, God is the inscrutable originator of the world who determines the fate of humankind. Just as the natural is in constant movement minus the presence of real change, so the human expenditure of energy comes to nought, despite the fact that reason leaves us baffled, the author affirms that life is worth living with all its limitations. The following metaphor (literal) interpretation, on the chapters of the Book of Ecclesiastes, are by Saint Gregory Thaumaturgus, an early Father of the Church.

Chapter 3

For this present time is filled with all things that are most contrary to each other— births and deaths, the growth of plants and their uprooting, cures and killings, the building up and the pulling down of houses, weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing. At this moment a man gathers of earth's products, and at another casts them away; and at one time he ardently desires *the beauty of woman*, and at another he hates it. Now he seeks something, and again he loses it; and now he keeps, and again he casts away; at one time he slays, and at another he is slain; he speaks, and again he is silent; he loves, and again he hates. For the affairs of men are at one time in a condition of war, and at another in a condition of peace; while their fortunes are so inconstant, that from bearing the semblance of good, they change quickly into acknowledged ills. Let us have done, therefore, with vain labours. For all these things, as appears to me, are set to madden men, as it were, with their poisoned stings.

And the ungodly observer of the times and seasons is agape for this world, exerting himself above measure to destroy the image of God, as one who has chosen to contend against it from the beginning onward to the end. I am persuaded, therefore, that the greatest good for man is cheerfulness and well-doing, and that this shortlived enjoyment, which alone is possible to us, comes from God only, if righteousness direct our doings. But as to those everlasting and incorruptible things which God has firmly established, it is not possible either to take anything from them or to add anything to them. And to men in general, those things, in truth, are fearful and wonderful; and those things indeed which have been, abide so; and those which are to be, have already been, as regards His foreknowledge. Moreover, the man who is injured has God as his helper. I saw in the lower parts the pit of punishment which receives the impious, but a different place allotted for the pious. And I thought with myself, that with God all things are judged and determined to be equal; that the righteous and the unrighteous, and objects with reason and without reason, are alike in His judgment. For that their time is measured out equally to all, and death impends over them, and *in this* the races of beasts and men are alike in the judgment of God, and differ from each other only in the matter of articulate speech; and all things else happen alike to them, and death receives all equally, not more so in the case of the other kinds of creatures than in that of men. For they have all the same breath *of life*, and men have nothing more; but all are, in one word, vain, deriving their present condition from the same earth, and destined to perish, and return to the same earth again. For it is uncertain regarding the souls of men, whether they shall fly upwards; and regarding the others which the unreasoning creatures possess, whether they shall fall downward. And it seemed to me, that there is no other good save pleasure, and the enjoyment of things present. For I did not think it possible for a man, when once he has tasted death, to return again to the enjoyment of these things.