



The Book of Ecclesiastes

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



Chapter 4

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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 4

And leaving all these reflections, I considered and turned in aversion from all the forms of oppression which are done among men; whence some receiving injury weep and lament, who are struck down by violence in utter default of those who protect them, or who should by all means comfort them in their trouble. And the men who make might their right are exalted to an eminence, from which, however, they shall also fall. Yea, of the unrighteous and audacious, those who are dead fare better than those who are still alive. And better than both these is he who, being destined to be like them, has not yet come into being, since he has not yet touched the wickedness which prevails among men. And it became clear to me also how great is the envy which follows a man from his neighbours, like the sting of a wicked spirit; and *I saw* that he who receives it, and takes it as it were into his breast, has nothing else but to eat his own heart, and tear it, and consume both soul and body, finding inconsolable vexation in the good fortune of others. And a wise man would choose to have one of his hands full, if it were with ease and quietness, rather than both of them with travail and with the villany of a treacherous spirit. Moreover, there is yet another thing which I know to happen contrary to what is fitting, by reason of the evil will of man. He who is left entirely alone, having neither brother nor son, but prospered with large possessions, lives on in the spirit of insatiable avarice, and refuses to give himself in any way whatever to goodness.

Gladly, therefore, would I ask such a one for what reason he labours thus, fleeing with headlong speed from the doing of anything good, and distracted by the many various passions for making gain. Far better than such are those who have taken up an order of life in common, from which they may reap the best blessings. For when two men devote themselves in the right spirit to the same objects, though some mischance befalls the one, he has still at least no slight alleviation in having his companion by him. And the greatest of all calamities to a man in evil fortune is the want of a friend to help and cheer him. And those who live together both double the good fortune that befalls them, and lessen the pressure of the storm of disagreeable events; so that in the day they are distinguished for their frank confidence in each other, and in the night they appear notable for their cheerfulness. But he who leads a solitary life passes a species of existence full of terror to himself; not perceiving that if one should fall upon men welded closely together, he adopts a rash and perilous course, and that it is not easy to snap the threefold cord. Moreover, I put a poor youth, if he be wise, before an aged prince devoid of wisdom, to whose thoughts it has never occurred that it is possible that a man may be raised from the prison to the throne, and that the very man who has exercised his power unrighteously shall at a later period be righteously cast out. For it may happen that those who are subject to a youth, who is at the same time sensible, shall be free from trouble—those, I mean, who are his elders. Moreover, they who are born later cannot praise another, of whom they have had no experience, and are led by an unreasoning judgment, and by the impulse of a contrary spirit. But in exercising the preacher's office, keep this before your eyes, that your own life be rightly directed, and that you pray in behalf of the foolish, that they may get understanding, and know how to shun the doings of the wicked.