



# VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

## You're Already Dead

### THE GOOD LIFE

### Ecclesiastes 3:16–4:16

Cisco Cotto | October 9, 2022

We are studying Ecclesiastes as a church and it's been a big pick-me-up, hasn't it? I had an Ecclesiastes moment this weekend. I maybe made the mistake of going to the Chicago Tribune and Chicago Sun Times websites. It is all Ecclesiastes, with reports of a politician who's in trouble for taking a bribe. There's a businessman who somehow embezzled millions from a bank and spent at least a million dollars of that money at a casino. I don't think they're ever getting that money back. There's a school official—this is painful—who resigned because there were abuse claims concerning a student, but he didn't take them seriously.

Look through the news, over and over again it is an Ecclesiastes world. It is a world in which people do bad things and hurt each other. That's not even counting the murders, robberies, shootings and carjackings. It's not counting all the things that happen in our lives that don't get reported. It is a rough world. There's a lot of pain. And as we look around the world, we see that time and time again, people hurt each other. Many times we treat each other well, but there are lots of times when we hurt each other and are left asking, "Why? Is there any hope?" Or we are just left to shrug our shoulders and say, "Yeah, that's the way it is. That's the world; you just have to deal with it."

To understand why this happens, to understand why we live in an Ecclesiastes world filled with pain and people who mistreat each other, we have to go all the way back to the beginning of the Bible. The book of Genesis tells us that God makes two people, Adam and Eve, and places them in a garden paradise. He says, "Hang out. Enjoy each other. Eat the fruit of all these trees. Enjoy a relationship with Me." Almighty God was living there among them. "Enjoy it. Have fun. This is fantastic. Work and thrive." God also told Adam and Eve, "Eat whatever you want here in the garden, but stay away from the fruit of one tree."

Like any parent who's ever had a young child knows, when you tell them they can't do one thing, that's the first thing they do. So Adam and Eve eat the fruit of this one tree and sin is unleashed on the world, so we have been dealing with the pain of sin ever since. God tells us several impacts of sin in Genesis. He says women are going to have extreme pain in childbirth because of sin. So, women giving birth, don't blame your husband—blame Eve for all the pain. He says work is going to be difficult. We're not going to like it. It's going to be hard.

Relationships are messed up because of sin. They are contentious instead of always loving. He says, "This is what you're going to have to deal with: broken relationships, extreme pain in childbirth, all of the hard work." We're going to have to deal with it every day until we die.

Then look at this. In Genesis 3, we see that one thing humans have to deal with as the result of sin is physical death. We are headed to the grave. He says work is hard. *"By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return"* (Genesis 3:19).

Men and women were supposed to live forever with God in this garden paradise, but sin messes it all up. So physical death is the destiny for each one of us. Unless Christ returns, we are all going to be in a grave someday. How's that for a Sunday morning pick-me-up? That's our destiny. We're all on this conveyor belt, headed to the grave because of sin.



We hurt each other because of sin. Is there no hope? Is there no way to turn this around? Do we just have to wait and see how God handles it in the end? Or is there something that can be done today? King Solomon in Ecclesiastes 3 has something to say to us. We're going to begin in verse 18.

Ancient King Solomon had just about anything you could imagine: all the power in the world, all the money in the world, all the influence in the world. He was one of wisest men who ever lived, if not the wisest. Yet Ecclesiastes captures his thoughts, likely near the end of his life. He's looking back on everything—all the pleasures, all the possessions, all the projects he completed, all the people he influences and controls.

He looks back at it all and he sees that it is vanity. It is vapor. Here one moment and gone the next. It's fleeting. You can't control it. You can't slow it down. You can't really manipulate it. It just keeps on going. We're on this conveyor belt headed toward the grave. What is it all worth? Is it all pointless?

## People, just like animals, are all on a path to the grave.

Solomon takes it one step further in Ecclesiastes 3. As he's looking around at life under the sun, at life in the here and now, he sees that not only are people on a path to the grave, but people are just like animals who are headed to the grave. He sees we have much in common with our furry friends. We're all living life, then we're all heading to the grave. He's throwing up his hands and wondering, "What is it all worth? What is the point of it? Is there any hope for anything more?" People, just like animals, are on a path to the grave.

Here is what Solomon says, beginning in Ecclesiastes 3:18:

<sup>18</sup>I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. <sup>19</sup>For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity. <sup>20</sup>All go to one place.

Then he gets all Genesis 3 on us here: "*All are from the dust, and to dust all return.*" In a depressed state, he desperately throws up his hands and says, "Who even knows what happens after the grave. All we can see is the grave." Have any of you seen heaven? This is his point here. It all seems so vapor-like. He says in verse 21:

<sup>21</sup>Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth? <sup>22</sup>So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

Throughout Ecclesiastes, you feel the challenge Solomon is facing with the fleeting nature of life, the fact that nothing really seems to last forever. He's frustrated and depressed. He's beside himself. He looks at the fact that not only are we on this conveyor belt, but all of our pets and other animals are as well. We're all just headed to the grave. What is the point of it all?

In New York state, there is a cemetery where Edward Way is buried—Edward along with Bibi Way. It's quite an epitaph. Edward's is on the left—he died in 1976. Edward says, "Here we sleep forever, I and my beloved Bibi, my loving companion for 14 years, together in life, together in death." Now, I know that cemeteries are sad places. Death is sad. But this is a pretty nice epitaph—an epitaph of love. Edward and Bibi. It says Bibi Way died in 1973.

However, cemetery records indicate that Bibi was a cat. Edward was buried next to his beloved Bibi. Now, some of you love your cats and dogs. You have a new idea now, don't you? You're saying, "Wait. They'll do that? They'll bury us next to each other? I had no idea."

Just like animals, humans are on this conveyor belt to the grave. This is what Solomon is saying. We're all going to be in the ground someday. In his desperation, Solomon is asking is there any hope? Is there any reason why we even go forward at all? Solomon looks out over the world around him and only sees this Ecclesiastes world. He sees the way we treat each other; really, how we mistreat each other.



## People get power wrong on their path to the grave.

On this conveyor to the grave, there are many things we get wrong, including the way we use power. People get power wrong on their path to the grave. Solomon points out four things we get wrong, beginning with power.

Influence and authority are not bad. God has created hierarchies and systems. He wants there to be leaders and followers in order for there to be an orderly world.

Power is not bad, but the abuse of power is bad and Solomon sees that it goes on all the time. It's true in our day as well. In verse 16, Solomon sees that in places where there is supposed to be justice, where people are supposed to be able to count on the right thing happening, there is instead wickedness. He wrote, *"I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness."* He's saying that in the place where people should be able to count on things going well, there are times when injustice happens.

This past week—another item in the news—eight convictions were overturned because years ago a Chicago police officer beat confessions out of these people. They didn't actually commit the crimes; he beat them until they signed the papers, then they got shipped off to prison. This truth was discovered and these people have now been set free.

Now, this doesn't mean that all justice is bad in our system, that all police officers are bad, all judges are bad, juries are bad. No. But it does mean there are times when we can see that people should be able to count on integrity, but instead they are mistreated. Instead there is hardship and manipulation, and it is painful.

Solomon is wondering, "Is there any hope? Can there be a change, or do we just have to wait until the end of time?" That's what he says in verse 17, basically shrugging his shoulders and saying, "There's nothing that can be done. We have to wait for God to sort it out." He says, *"I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work."*

You see, Solomon sees on this conveyor belt to the grave, for people and beasts nothing can change. There's no way to know if justice will actually be served until later. When we get out of here, hopefully God will sort it all out. Is that what we're left with? Is that all we have? Is that the only hope we have? Maybe God will make it right someday? Or do we have hope for something different today?

Solomon goes on beyond the point that there should be integrity but instead there is wickedness, and he talks about people in positions of power who oppress those who are below them. Turn to Ecclesiastes 4 where he talks about those who oppress people who are underneath them. The very people who should be protecting, the very people who should be leading with kindness, are instead hurting the people below them, taking advantage of them and manipulating them. He says in verse one:

I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them.

What does he think is better than dealing with this? It's better to not even be alive. If you're going to deal with someone in authority over you who is abusing you, it's better to not even be alive. And beyond that, it's even better to have never been alive. This is the way Solomon is seeing things in his desperation. He says, beginning in verse two:

And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

Power is not bad. Power is given by God. Leadership and authority are part of God's design. Leaders and followers—that's the way God set things up. But because of the sin we see in Genesis 3 that has been unleashed on the world, people get this wrong. They mess this up. So people who are in positions of power see the people underneath them as tools to be used. They think, "In the workplace, I'm the boss. I can use these people in order to grow, make more money and climb up the ladder. In the household, I'm the parent. These kids are here just to serve me. I'm going to make them do whatever I want, so I don't have to do it."

There are many ways people in power hurt those below them, but that's not God's design. God's design is for people in authority to lift up those they are leading, to build them up, and to handle this with integrity. They need to look at the people they are leading and say, "It's about them. How am I going to help them? How am I going to grow them? How am I going to care for them?"

This is true in churches, too. There are churches where leaders hurt people, manipulating them in order to get whatever they want done. That's not God's design. He wants church leadership, but He wants the power and influence harnessed so people are growing and being cared for, that little by little they're being made more like Jesus.

Power is not bad. Authority and leadership are not bad. But sin causes people to abuse them. Solomon looks out over the world and sees that we're all heading to the grave. Along the path to the grave, we are getting power wrong. Sin is messing it up.

## **People get work wrong on their path to the grave.**

Solomon also notices that we get work wrong on our way to the grave. Work is not bad. God made us to work. He has gifted us to work. Work is good and it honors Him. Yet sin messes it up. This is Genesis 3 kind of stuff. Work is now hard, so we don't engage work in the way God intends us to. Sometimes we use work for the wrong reasons. Sometimes we try to get out of work altogether.

Solomon begins by talking about the reasons. He tells the fictitious tale of a man who works, works, works, works, works, and the only reason, the only drive, is because his neighbor has more stuff than he has. So he's working those 10, 12, 14-hour days—not because he has to, not because that's what has to be done to put the food on the table—but because his neighbor has things he doesn't have and he wants them.

So using the gifts of work for him are not something to honor God. It's not something for God's glory and our thriving. Instead, work is all a means to an end. He has stuff that I don't have, so I'm going to get it. Here's how it says this in Ecclesiastes 4:4: *"Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind."*

He's talking about a person who sees that his neighbor has a nicer house, a bigger house, maybe two houses. He says, "Why does he have what I don't?" So instead of working to honor God, instead of working to provide, this person works and works and works; his goal the whole time is, "This neighbor is not going to have more than me." But that's not why God gave us work. That's not why He built us to work. He's doing it with the wrong motives.

Another way we get work wrong is by not doing it at all. Laziness, trying to get out of work.

Solomon gives us a proverb that is pretty vivid in verse five: *"The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh."* Here's the picture he's trying to paint. This is a man who does not want to work, so he's just sitting there, folding his hands, biding his time. Little by little, the food starts to run out. He's hungry. He's still unwilling to work. His laziness has consumed him, so little by little by little, he just starts eating his own flesh.

This vivid picture that Solomon is painting is someone who would be willing to eat his own flesh before be willing to work. This is laziness, idleness.

In my own life, I tend to put off doing the laundry and dishes until the very last minute, because I'm at my best in the last minute. I do my best work under pressure. At least that's what I tell myself. It's not laziness. It's not that those chores are hard or that I don't like them. I just don't want to do it, so I put it off as long as I possibly can. No. That's not what it is.

Yes, of course it is. We don't like work. It is toil. This is Genesis 3 kind of stuff, so we tend to be lazy, or at the very least just push it all off. We don't want to do it.

What's been going on for decades in America? There's been this American dream to work hard all your life, save up as much money as you can, then at age 65 you're done with work forever. "I'm slaving away in this job. I'm going to work as hard as I have to. I'm going to get whatever money I need. Then as soon as I can retire, I'm done. No more work. I'm going to the beach. I'm going to read a book. I'm going to relax and never work another day in my life." That is the dream many people are living: laziness, lack of contentment, not understanding that work is a gift. We get work totally wrong. I'm sorry to break it to you, but the Bible says nothing about a retirement in which we completely give up work. I know. I just crushed some of your hopes and dreams. Some of you were saying, "65? I'm out at 59 ½. What is this guy talking about?"

Work is good. Work honors God. We're to work as long as we are physically able. Because of sin, we get this wrong. We work for the wrong reasons. We try to get out of work as much as we can. Solomon looks at this and says, "On our conveyor belt path to the grave, we get work wrong." Instead of seeing it as a way to honor God, we misuse it and see it as something to get rid of.

However, he gives us a little bit of hope here in verse six, essentially encouraging us to go ahead and work: *“Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.”* He’s saying, “It’s okay. Go ahead and work, but work with contentment. Don’t make it a bother to work.” Work is pointless if it’s not enjoyable. It is this striving after the wind, trying to grab hold of the wind. It’s elusive. Instead work to honor God.

Solomon looks around and sees that people get power wrong and work wrong. He’s subtly asking the question: is there any hope or do we just have to wait until the grave to see how God sorts it all out?” Is there any hope for this being different for us, sisters and brothers, or do we, like Solomon, just have to shrug our shoulders and wait?

## **People get relationships wrong on their path to the grave.**

Solomon also says we treat relationships wrong. We treat people as though they are tools to be used and manipulated. They’re there for our good, not for their good. We don’t see relationships as requiring us to give in to others, to build into them, to sacrifice for them. We don’t understand the value of partnerships, so quite often we isolate ourselves. We ignore others. We say, “I have enough friends; I don’t need any more.” We push people away.

Solomon says we’re getting it wrong because we don’t understand that God built us for community. Even when it’s hard, even when it’s costly, God builds us for community. He says in verse seven, *“Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches.”* Here’s a person who doesn’t have anyone in his life, yet he’s working hard to get as much money as possible. But, *“he never asks himself, ‘For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?’ This also is vanity and an unhappy business.”*

If you get to the end of your life and are sitting on stacks of cash, but have never had meaningful relationships, what’s the point? It’s all vanity. It’s all vapor. It’s all here and gone. What were the hours for? God built us for relationships.

Hear me on this. It’s different if you’re working a 10, 12, 14-hour days on multiple jobs because you need to do that in order to put food on the table. What Solomon is talking about here is people who engage in work, avoiding life-giving relationships they should have. It becomes all about what they can get, all about their possessions, not about others. They are completely self-absorbed.

He goes on to say:

<sup>9</sup> Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. <sup>10</sup> For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! <sup>11</sup> Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? <sup>12</sup> And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

If someone decides they would like to do harm to you, you’re safer if you have someone with you. There’s safety in numbers. But we get it wrong. We avoid relationships at times—why? They are costly. Relationships require us to deny ourselves in order to build into others.

The time alone is costly. Has you had your cell phone ring and it’s someone who needs you? You see their name on the caller ID and you sigh. You know it’s going to be a long phone call, so you ask yourself, “Am I going to answer it or not?” Now, that’s a challenge. It’s costly. But God says, “I’ve built you for each other, to support each other, help each other, build each other up.” Together we are to enable each other to be more like Jesus. We are designed for community.

This is one of the reasons you hear us talk about small groups so much here at Village Bible Church. It’s because we know God made us for community. As we’re reading the Scriptures together, encouraging each other and praying for one another, we are growing. We are getting relationships right when we’re willing to do that. But because of sin, because of tension, because of our self-centeredness, we get this wrong.

## **People get fame wrong on their path to the grave.**

We get power wrong on our path to the grave. We get work wrong on our path to the grave. We get relationships wrong on our path to the grave. And the final observation that Solomon makes is we get fame wrong on our path to the grave. Fame? That’s what’s driving so much of our world. People wonder, “How many followers do you have on Instagram? How many people liked

your TikTok video?" Social media is all about becoming an influencer. None of it is ever focused rightly on God, His purposes, His glory, the spread of the gospel, the expansion of God's Kingdom.

See, fame in and of itself is not bad. Power, work, relationships, fame—none of them are bad. God has made all of them and wants us to use them for His purposes. But because of sin, it all goes off the rails. We do this wrong and hurt people. We crave fame because of what it gets us: influence and power. We crave fame because it makes us feel validated. We're somebody if enough people know us and like us. That's why Facebook created the 'like' button in the first place. When we get that 'like,' we get a little hit of dopamine in our brains. "Ah, I'm somebody; 32 people like me. I must be somebody."

It's the quest for fame, not for God's purposes. That's where we go off the rails and Solomon sees it. He tells us a story about a man who started off poor and wise. Slowly but surely over time, he ascended to the throne. He got rich. He got old. He got influential. But then he got foolish. What this king ends up seeing is all his power, all his influence, all his authority, all the people who used to follow him just disappear when he leaves the throne. Solomon writes:

<sup>13</sup> Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. <sup>14</sup> For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. <sup>15</sup> I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place.

That's the person who was to become the next king. "There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led." This king led thousands, or tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands. He was influential and powerful. But "those who come later will not rejoice in him." They won't know who he was and they won't care. "Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind." Fame is fleeting. Influence ends at some point.

This past June, my family took a trip to Los Angeles. On a beautiful day in L.A. with lots of sunshine, we were walking through a park when all of a sudden I looked up and said, "That kind of looks like David Letterman." So I kept walking on the path to get closer. "Yeah, it really does look like David." Then I listened, heard his voice and said, "That's David Letterman!" So what did I do?

I thought, "Well, he's with some friends. I'm going to give him some privacy and walk the other direction." No, I didn't do that! I said, "David!" He said, "Cisco!" No. He didn't do that. That would have been really cool. Don't get me wrong. But no, he didn't do that. He said, "What's your name?" We started chatting and for 15 minutes, I talked with David and his friends. It was wonderful. He was so kind. I want to show you a picture of this, all right? This is David and me, hanging out in the park in L.A.



Now, for 15 minute we talked about radio. For those of you who don't know, I'm a radio host, and David grew up in Indiana listening to several stations, including the one where I work. So we talked about radio. We talked about TV. We talked about YouTube. We talked about deep dish pizza. We talked about Conan O'Brien. Just chit-chat for 15 minutes like we were old friends. Then we said our good-byes and went our separate ways.

I walked back over to my wife and three kids and guess what? The first thing out of my kids' mouths was, "Dad, who was that guy? You're talking to a stranger in a park in L.A. What's going on here?" I had to explain, "Kids, this is one of the most famous TV stars of all time. Millions of people watched his show every night. He made millions of dollars when he was on the air. He couldn't walk around his studio in New York because people would mob him. Don't you understand who he is?"

They didn't understand and they really weren't all that impressed either. Fame is fleeting, yet we seek after it. We want it. We crave it. We want the attention. We want the power that comes with it. Solomon is reminding us here that fame for God's purposes is glorious. Fame and influence that allows us to share Jesus with others is great. But fame in and of itself, fame just because of what it brings us, is vanity. It is vapor. It is pointless. It's here one day and gone the next.

Do we have any hope, sisters and brothers, for dealing with this in the here and now? I mean, Solomon has looked out and seen that just like the animals, we're on a path to the grave. While we're on this conveyor belt on the way to the dirt, we get all kinds of things wrong. Power, work, relationships and fame—we get all this stuff wrong. Sin messes it all up. Is there any hope to change it today or do we just have to wait until we're in the afterlife, hoping God sorts it all out?

## Christians get life right by remembering they're already dead.

There's something interesting that I think helps us have hope for today. Hear me on this. I think Christians live life right when they remember they're already dead. I see some of you checking their pulses right now. Some of you are thinking, "I was told when I die I would go to heaven. No one said I would be sitting here and listening to Cisco!"

Here's what I mean by saying, "Christians, we are already dead and need to remind ourselves of it every day." The apostle Paul explains this in Galatians 2:20, a verse that if you haven't memorized, you need to. He says, "*I have been crucified with Christ...*" I'm dead. "*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*"

Christian, when you come to faith in Christ, when you acknowledge that you are a sinner who needs a Savior, Jesus is that Savior. When you repent of sin, when in faith you follow Him as your Lord, you die to self and are reborn. You are now empowered to live life rightly, because Jesus is living in you and through you.

It's not because of you. It's not because of me. It's because of Jesus and what He is doing. That's what was celebrated in the baptisms today, showing the fact that we die with Christ. That's why we go down into the water in baptism. We die with Christ, then just as Christ was raised to new life, so we are raised. We enjoy new life, unified to Jesus.

Because He is working in us and through us, as we yield to Him and acknowledge that He is in charge and we need to obey and follow Him more and more every single day, we live life the right way. No abuse of power. No working for the wrong reasons or avoiding it altogether. No hurting people in relationships. No seeking fame for our own glory. Instead, we live life the right way in the power of the risen Christ because, through the Holy Spirit, He is living in us and through us.

Sisters and brothers, unless Jesus comes back first, we're all headed to the grave. But in the meantime, we can do more than simply shrug at all the pain we see around us. We can confidently lean into the fact that we're already dead. We died with Christ and have been raised to new life with Him. So we can ask Him to work in us and through us. We can be different in this Ecclesiastes world. The people around us can see this difference and ask, "What is going on with you? Why aren't you doing these things that all the other people are doing?" Then we can say, "Not that we're more hard-working or better or smarter or nicer." No, we can talk about the power of the crucified and risen Christ in our lives.

In an Ecclesiastes world, for today and for every day we're on this earth, this is the hope we have, sisters and brothers.

Village Bible Church | 847 North State Route 47, Sugar Grove, IL 60554 | (630) 466-7198 | [www.villagebible.org/sugar-grove](http://www.villagebible.org/sugar-grove)

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