



PENN FREE METHODIST  
CHURCH  
BIBLE STUDY

15th February 2017

ECCLESIASTES 4:13-16

**THE ULTIMATE  
FUTILITY  
OF EARTHLY  
POWER AND  
INFLUENCE**

**KEY TO  
THE LAYOUT  
OF THIS STUDY**

**The verses being  
studied are in  
bold type**

*Supporting and  
illustrative Scripture texts  
are in italics*

The explanation and  
commentary on the  
verses being  
studied and of the  
supporting texts are in  
normal typeface

**v13. Better is a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished.** In a world which is characterised by rebellion against God there is a vanity and futility in human existence. All areas of human experience are tainted by this futility. Solomon here particularly focuses upon the vanity of high office and great political power. An older king who has long been used to possessing power may well become proud and refuse to listen to counsel. Thus Solomon speaks in this v13 of “an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished”. In such a situation it would be better to have a mere child on the throne. ‘Child’ here means a child relatively, and so the word can refer to a young man without any experience of ruling. If that young man has wisdom, even though he might come from a poor and humble background, yet he will be better for the nation than the arrogant king with great experience, but who thinks that he needs no advice. How empty is the glorying of men. The pride of their hearts deceives them.

In this fallen world, not even the dignity of kingship is a guarantee that the holder of the office will be a wise and righteous man. Back in chapter 3:16 Solomon has already observed that there is “wickedness in the place of judgement”, that is, there are evil men amongst the magistrates and others who possess authority. Solomon also knows that he himself has marred his office by his foolish conduct. He is writing Ecclesiastes in his old age, and so he speaks here from personal experience. He had tragically cast off the wisdom and fear of the Lord with which he had commenced his reign. He ended up alienating his own people.

*(The people to Solomon's son), "Thy father made our yoke grievous: now therefore make thou the grievous service of thy father, and his heavy yoke which he put upon us, lighter, and we will serve thee" (1 Kings 12:4).* Here we see that upon Solomon's death the nation's leaders were complaining to his successor about the way he had been governing, especially his unjust taxation. Solomon was also guilty of leading the nation into idolatry.

**v13. Better is a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished.** This, then, is Solomon's reflection towards the end of his reign. As he considers his own mistakes and forgetfulness of God's commandments, he realises that a youth with no experience, but with God-given wisdom, would be far better for the nation. Even if he were of humble origins with no royal upbringing, such a one would still be a far better prospect than the foolish, arrogant king that he had become. Whatever walk of life a man finds himself in, he will only be truly wise, if he humbles himself before God. A humble child can be infinitely wiser than the great men of this world.

*"Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3-4).* So here we learn that the pride of men in their worldly wisdom in fact keeps them men out of the kingdom of heaven. Matthew Henry comments, "Wisdom and virtue will gain men honour even under the disadvantages of youth and (relative) poverty". Solomon's point is that age, experience and the privileges of earthly elevation should result in righteous and exemplary leadership, but tragically, in a fallen world, this often does not happen, and he himself is a case in point.

**v14. For out of prison he cometh to reign.** Solomon now speaks of a successor to an old and foolish king, a youth of humble origins, and who even comes from outside of the kingdom, but who nevertheless takes up the high office. In God's providence such a thing may happen. God can promote whomsoever He wishes, even one who has formerly been bound as a prisoner. We thus read : "Out of prison he cometh to reign". After all, such a thing had happened to Joseph, who was a young man not from Egypt, who had been imprisoned in Egypt, but who, in God's providence, came out of that prison, and was promoted to the position of Egypt's Prime Minister, second only in authority to Pharaoh himself.

*"He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill; That he may set him with princes, even with the princes of his people" (Psalm 113:7-8).* Men who wield power and authority today must never allow that privilege to go to their heads. In any case, the privilege will only be temporary. There will be soon be others waiting in the wings to take their place. Men in high places must realise that they are answerable to God, who gave them their position in the first place. They must have a humble dependence upon Him.

*"There is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God ... For he is the minister of God to thee for good" (Romans 13:1,4).* Here is a statement of God's ideal; this is what should be happening. Rulers should be ruling as God's ministers, or servants.

*"The God of Israel said ... He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God" (2 Samuel 23:3).* Let us consider Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, who ruled in the imagined power of his own strength and resourcefulness, and who trusted in his wealth and his armies. The Lord in His anger at that proud ruler took away his rational faculties and caused him to become a gibbering wreck of a man, until such time as he humbled himself before his Maker, and bowed down before the God of Israel.

**v14. For out of prison he cometh to reign; whereas also he that is born in his kingdom becometh poor.** Solomon is saying here that in God's providence a man may succeed to the throne who was not the designated heir, and who had formerly even been in prison and living outside of the kingdom. Such a one will replace the elderly longstanding king, and will oust the expected heir, even though this heir was born

into the royal line in his own country. Far from taking up the throne, he will become poor and insignificant. There is ultimately, then, a vanity which adheres to high office. Solomon is doubtless thinking of his own personal situation, because he has already been told by the Lord that upon his death he will be replaced by a relatively insignificant young man, not of the royal family. We read of this in 1 Kings 11, v11, where the Lord makes the following announcement to Solomon :

*“Forasmuch as ... thou hast not kept my covenant and my statutes, which I have commanded thee, I will surely rend the kingdom from thee, and will give it to thy servant. Notwithstanding in thy days I will not do it for David thy father’s sake: but I will rend it out of the hand of thy son” (1 Kings 11:11,12).* So one of Solomon’s own *servants* is going to succeed to his throne, whereas his own son will be disinherited of a greater part of the kingdom. The servant who will take over the throne will be Jeroboam, who was not even a royal prince, but who was living in exile, effectively as a prisoner, because Solomon had foolishly sought to kill him. In 1 Kings 11:26 Jeroboam is actually referred to as “a servant of Solomon”. His mother was a widow, and widowhood generally meant a less prosperous position in society. So an insignificant son of widow is going to take over the bulk of Solomon’s kingdom. This was an aspect of God’s judgement upon Solomon for departing from the laws of God.

**v14. For out of prison he cometh to reign; whereas also he that is born in his kingdom becometh poor.** So this v14 is effectively a summary of the Lord’s forewarning that Jeroboam would be elevated and that Solomon’s own son Rehoboam would be demoted. The child, or young man, spoken of in v13, therefore, as well as referring to *any* wise but inexperienced man who might come to the throne, refers also *specifically* to Jeroboam. He is the wise child, the youthful person of humble, non-royal origins who will nevertheless become king. He will harness to himself the people’s affections, whereas Solomon, in this latter part of his reign, has alienated them through excessive taxation and forced labour. *Jeroboam, then,* is the one who will come out of prison to reign as Solomon’s successor.

**v15. “I considered all the living which walk under the sun, with the second child that shall stand up in his stead”.** The young man who comes after the old king is here called “the second child”. So it is ‘second’ in the sense of successor. He will enjoy enormous popular acclaim. “All the living which walk under the sun” refers to the whole present generation. They will all rally to Jeroboam’s side. The word ‘with’ here in v15 means “in association with”. All the people will gladly be in association with the new ruler, namely Jeroboam. He will successfully steal the people’s affections.

**v16. “There is no end of all the people, even of all that have been before them”.** ‘end’ here is in the sense of ‘cessation’; there is no cessation in the fickle attitude of all the people; the present generation are going after the new king, and even all those who have gone before both the old king and his youthful successor were of the same nature. In every generation, past and present, the great mass of the people are slaves to the fashion of the moment and the spirit of the age.

**v16. “... they also that come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and vexation of spirit”.** The next generation, which comes after the present one, will not rejoice in the new king. This “second child”, this fashionable successor to the old king, is all the rage at the moment, but he too will be rejected by the next generation. And so the cycle continues. Rulers and their popularity rise and wane. Nothing is stable and secure in this fallen world. When the great men of this world pursue their ambitions without God, all is ultimate futility. It will end in vexation; it is a mere striving after wind. The whole world at the current time seems to be going after Jeroboam, so wise has he been in winning people’s affections, and so foolish has Solomon been in alienating them. In politics, the rising star waiting in the wings is always more popular than the one who is currently in power. This is the ‘vanity’ of holding high office which Solomon is observing. In the future, however, even Jeroboam’s popularity will wane. Those that come after the present generation, *their* children, will tire of him, just as their fathers tired of Solomon. In fact, the current ‘wonder boy’, Jeroboam, will turn out to be the worst possible king Israel

could ever have had, and he would receive no honour in his burial. We thus see the ultimate futility of the initial acclaim and popularity which Jeroboam enjoyed.

By the time that Solomon is writing Ecclesiastes his foolishness and disobedience before God is thankfully now behind him. He has been humbled and has repented. He now realises that he cannot frustrate what God has decreed, and that Jeroboam will inevitably come to reign in his place. He therefore now reflects upon the fact that here he is as king of Israel, having enjoyed in the past invincible power and unspeakable wealth, yet now one of his servants is about to take over most of his kingdom in preference to his own son. This youth of lowly background has manifested more wisdom in the art of government than he himself has, who was once the wisest man in all the earth. Thus Solomon observes that the regal splendour and political power which he once enjoyed are an ultimate vanity. All the glories of high office could not compensate for his failure to persevere in faithfulness to God, and to uphold true worship.

## **Conclusion**

Our politicians today should consider these things, as they renounce our Christian foundations and submit to the philosophical fashions of liberal secularism. Their swimming with the tide is an ultimate vanity. They should consider how Solomon's glory soon evaporated, as he led the nation away from the Lord. In this fallen world the glories of power and authority are fleeting and afford no lasting fulfilment. Not even the holding of high office could provide Solomon with any true satisfaction in his heart. This world, when lived in without reference to God, always disappoints in the end. Hardly any politician ends his career with the success and popularity which he formerly enjoyed. What an empty world this is, unless men put their faith and trust in Christ alone.

Not even being king had brought Solomon true purpose and fulfilment. Very few in all history have enjoyed as much wealth and power as Solomon once did. Very few have experienced such an elevation above the lot of the ordinary man, as he did. Nevertheless, he found it all to be an utter futility. No earthly glory lasts. Solomon has seen his own glory and acclaim fade away. He now sees Jeroboam's star rising, but he knows that even Jeroboam's current popularity will evaporate. Therefore, let no one today seek fulfilment in power, in government and in obtaining popular support and in swimming with the tide. There can be no fulfilment to be found in any earthly pursuit or endeavour or achievement, unless there is first and foremost in a person's life repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Without Christ human life is mere "vanity and vexation of spirit". This is true for individuals; it is also true for nations.