



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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Lessons from Mike Black

Ecclesiastes 4:9 – 5:9

Lesson 6 of 16

2007-08

"Observations And A Better Way of Life"

TRANSCRIPT

This is the sixth lecture in the Book of Ecclesiastes and I am going to ask you to mark one particular text that I think will amplify our study tonight and to which I particularly want to draw your attention. That would be the prophet Jonah, and particularly if you would mark Jonah Chapter 2. Normally I would read our text for tonight since that is the way classic exposition is done. But because I have so much material and I'm so sensitive about carrying over my time allotment, I am going to withhold from reading the text until later. We will pick up our study from where we left off at Chapter 4:9 and we will go all the way through to Chapter 5:9. We will first spend some time looking at the structure of this passage to give some texture to it before we begin our exposition.

Reviewing: Our study is from 'the man with the powerful mind', Qoheleth. And the subject that he is presenting is life 'under the sun', or life lived on the horizontal plane. Now, you must understand that the phrase 'under the sun', is discussing our life in this *horizontal plane* and with his discussion we can gain great insight into life itself. He is applying his 'powerful mind' to the subject of life: But he is not describing the Christian life. He is not discussing New Testament doctrine or our spiritual relationship with our LORD as believers in Christ.

So, as a believer, it is very important to understand this horizontal perspective or otherwise this book will bewilder you. Matter of fact The Holy Spirit, Who has regenerated us, has translated us out of this horizontal thinking; this life 'under the sun'.

For example, under the commands of the apostles we are not to dwell upon the horizontal thinking of life 'under the sun'. Rather we are to think much beyond that. Here is the apostle Paul, Colossians 3:1-3, "Since you have been raised with Christ, set your heart" (*and the heart and the mind are one and the same*) "set your heart on things above; where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." Or Romans 12:2, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." And Philippians 2:5 "Let this mind be in you, which was in Christ Jesus" (KJV). So the Christian mind is different than 'the man with the powerful mind'. But since his mind and observations are good and useful for correction, for doctrine, and for righteousness (2Tim 3:16), his 'powerful mind' gives us great insight to this life so that we may benefit from his observations.

This mind is powerful and God has given him great skill in observing life as it appears through the senses: But what he has told us has been pretty disappointing. For example, Chapter 1:14, he said, "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind." In the same chapter, Verse 16, "I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." And Verse 17b-18, "...but I learned that this, too, is chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief." So life, as he sees it, is filled with frustration, loss, and disappointment. But it is the truth and that's what we are studying; the truth as he scrutinized it; our 'man with the powerful mind'.

So here we are on tonight's lesson: Observations And A Better Way To Live. Now the structure of our passage is from 4:9 to 5:9, and our outline falls into four parts. The first, 4:9-12, his observations on companionship. The second point of the outline would be Verses 13-16; his observations on the brevity of public acclaim. Thirdly,

Chapter 5:1-7, his observations on godly commitment. And finally, Chapter 5:8-9, his observations on political oppressors.

The key word in our lesson tonight is the word 'better'. We see it first here in Chapter 4:9 and then notice it is also in Verse 13 of this same chapter. Then in Chapter 5:1, it is translated in the NIV, as '*rather than*', but that's a stylistic feature, not an exegetical feature. It's obvious from the context 'drawing near to God and listening is better than offering the sacrifice of fools.' And the fourth and final 'better' is found in Chapter 5:5.

Well, let's begin our exposition and we will try to cover our text tonight. Our first observation, Verses 9-12, is on companionship. Now this comes right after his observation on the miser that we saw last week (4:8), 'the lonely miser'. Here he leads us to consider the advantages of companionship. Companionship is a help when there's work to be done; when one falls down and needs help getting up. A friend or loved one can keep one warm on a cold night and can help in the defense of oneself. Thus, Verse 9 stresses that principle and gives us the first illustration of it. Notice, this example is an economic one. The NIV (4:9b) the "...return for their work...". That's your text. In other words, another's efforts will enhance one's style and pace.

Dr. Waltke gave me a good illustration of this when he was explaining his work as a student at Harvard University in the doctoral program. He said the first-year students were always assigned to a group. They want to keep you in groups and studying in groups. The reason: The work is too hard for one student alone to try to do it; it would be discouraging. And so a group keeps everyone fresh, with fresh thoughts, fresh ideas, and companionship.

Next, you will observe the first of three verses that thematically connect to a journey. Vs 10's simple point: 'A companion is able to rescue a traveler from a fall.' I think the idea here is to assume that this fall is a very serious one. An important note that we need to make as believers is that this story could be referring to any difficulty in

life. And let me remind you: We are indeed our "...brother's keeper..." (Gen4:9). So our responsibility is to minister and to help one another: Always.

Verse 11; a third example, is derived from a journey with the image of two people traveling together who at night share body heat. It's a contrast to one lonely figure trying to keep himself warm. This again emphasizing the advantage of companionship.

Verse 12a, the fourth and final example, also finds its natural setting on a journey: 'If someone attacks one of them, the two of them together will resist'. As you probably know, the roads in the ancient Near East were often hazardous to travel. To go outside of a town or a city in that period of time was a great danger because of robbers.

A lone traveler was easy prey and the backdrop for Psalm 121, 'The Traveler's Psalm'. It is the idea that a man once a year puts his plow aside. He leaves his wife and children and he goes up, up, up to the mountains, to the rugged terrain of Jerusalem. And there he offers his sacrifices for his family, as an obedient, orthodox Jew under The Law. So, Psalm 121, a psalm for the traveler, a psalm of protection.

I will lift up my eyes to the hills—
where does my help come from?
My help is from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
Indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD watches over you—
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.

The LORD will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
the LORD will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.

Psalm 121

You will remember that when Israel moved into the promised land and took over the land that they had no king. But they wanted a king. This was disgraceful in the eyes of Samuel, because the LORD their God was their king. An invisible king Who protected them, Who watched over them, Who ministered to them. But yet they wanted a figure: A man. So He gave them exactly what they wanted. He chose the biggest, the brightest, the best. The one we would have picked. And He showed what an utter failure men are compared to Himself.

Well, for a man to set aside his agricultural equipment and to go up on this long, arduous trip, this psalm promises that the LORD God is his protector; and He will protect you always by being obedient to His Word. He will watch over your coming and going. Your foot will not slip. He's there to watch over you in the sunshine. He's there to watch over you in the darkness. It's a great Psalm and a great blessing to all of us who follow His Word.

Now the section concludes with a proverb (vs12b): "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." This number 'three' has generated significant discussion among the scholars and their commentaries. Much has been made over the number 'two'; a companion as a positive, as opposed to number 'one'; a single individual. It could be that the number three, the three cords tied together, is a climatic conclusion typical of what we would call numerical parallelism. The idea is this: If one is bad, and two is good, how much better would three be?

Now some have applied the interpretation of three strands making up this cord as the three persons in the Trinity. Ambrose, one of the early Christian fathers and great Christian teacher, saw the cord as Christ lifting up His church; lifting up His companions as it were. Now these are interesting, and forceful, and open to interpretations: But I really believe they're outside the pale of good exegesis.

I take the cord simply as an image of strength that is parallel with our theme of companionship; companions and relationships. If you have two, or three, or five, that's better than one. That's the idea and that's the way I understand it.

Our Teacher with the powerful mind now moves to the subject of the brevity of power and public acclaim. He gives us an anecdote that is surprisingly ambiguous because it's difficult to determine if there are two or three characters involved in the story. Verse 13 introduces us to two individuals by way of contrast. Now the contrast here is very important and very forceful, so we want to focus on that. Observe first that they're opposites in terms of social status; one poor, one a king. Secondly, they are opposites in their age; one a youth, the other older. And thirdly, they're opposites in knowledge; one wise, one foolish.

Now these contrasts are very important to the story and very important to its meaning. Let's consider that normally we would think it would be the old king that is very wise and that the poor youth would be the fool. But the point of the story, at least as we have it to this point, is that this youth, born in poverty, and imprisoned, can overcome everything by his wisdom. The king's foolishness is explained in the last clause; notice, he does not pay attention to advice. The poor youth, we're told (vs14) has a resumé from prison. Yet isn't it interesting that it is the old foolish king who has actually imprisoned himself. You see, he reached the pinnacle of a human standard; KING! What more can he do? So now he's imprisoned because he is left all to himself.

How so, you say? Well, he's stuck on stupid because he's stuck on himself; trapped and imprisoned as the only and final authority on everything. He's been listening to his own applause too long. Perhaps he's forgotten who he is and what he is to be about; namely the glory of God and the service to his people in his kingdom. Much like King Saul who started off so well; but then he started erecting monuments to himself. What was that all about? And then disobeying the Word of the LORD (through Samuel, the prophet) by making David (Saul's prized commander) into his prized enemy. The king, whoever he is, is condemned because he chose his own counsel over that of the Word of God. That is the foremost act of a fool.

Let's listen to some Proverbs: Proverbs 11:14, "For lack of guidance a nation falls, but with many advisors makes victory sure." Proverbs 15:22, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed." Proverbs 20:18, "Make plans by seeking

advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance." And Proverbs 24:6, "...for waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers." No wonder he's called a fool. He would not listen to anyone but his own opinions. Stubborn and old, he became worthless.

Now contrast him to the lad who becomes king. His humble origins are relevant to the story. Verse 14: Notice this youth does not supplant the old king even though he came from prison and even though he was born in the king's kingdom. Rather, what we have in the story is that he rose to the highest office in the land from jail. Imagine that.

Now many commentators, at this point, want to impress upon us the story of Joseph, Genesis 37:41-57. And true, Joseph left a jail cell to rule as leader over the entire empire of Egypt. But in fact, Joseph did not become a king; for Egypt didn't have a king. And yet in Eccl. 4:13, we have the word *melek*; the Hebrew word for 'king'. The office that Joseph held in Egypt was as a chief operating officer. He was accountable as the No. 2. He ran the daily affairs in all of Egypt. He ran the organization. So, our 'man with the powerful mind' is just telling a story here and not trying to make an historical point.

Now Verse 15 offers the ambiguity of a possible third individual who would replace the poor youth. Some have suggested the translation 'with the next youth who replaced him', which makes the main idea an illustration of temporal glory. Personally, I don't think you have to introduce a third personality in the story to illustrate the brevity of a claim. Let's notice Verse 15. He uses two phrases to refer to all the teeming humanity that sided with the newcomer; first, 'All who lived and walked under the sun', and second, Verse 16, 'There was no end to those who were before them'.

Now to what I see is the point of this story: How did this youth from prison gain such fame? Well, we're not told; yet it's obvious that he had the right stuff. People loved him. But, (vs16) the people who came later were not pleased with him. All during his career, obstacle after obstacle, to the grand job; the ultimate job—King. But in the end, he's not appreciated. I wonder why? We're not told. Maybe he didn't win enough. Maybe he taxed the people too hard. We don't know. But here's what we do know from the story. Glory is fading even for popular and powerful people; even for people that

have overcome great obstacles in life. All the way from poverty; to prison; to King! Yet, in the end...Unappreciated. So sad. Glory fades for even a king. And so he says, "This, too is meaningless a chasing after the wind."

Now Chapter 5:1-7 and we come to the third observation: 'Godly commitment'. Vs 1: "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather ('*is better*'), than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong." The phrase 'watch (*guard*) your step' is a warning to all of us. We're to be cautious in our behavior as we approach God. In the second part of the verse, he admonishes people to listen when they approach God. Carefully observe this word listen.

How is it, in this life 'under the sun', that we interact with God? We do so by *listening* to his revelation. His Word speaks to us. This warning is aimed at the person who doesn't listen. We would call him today 'the drifter'. Oh, he comes to the meetings. He gets up and sings the doxology. He fumbles around and finally gets to the page for the hymn; and then he sits there. Sometimes his eyes are closed. He's drifting. He attends the meetings, but he doesn't pay any attention. 'Being a hearer of the Word of God', says 'the man with the powerful mind', 'is better than the sacrifice of fools'. 'The sacrifice of fools' is any religious formality that people believe can appease God. 'I suited up, I showed up, and I did it. Now let's move on.' But I want you to notice from our man, our Teacher, there is no appeasement when God's Word is ignored.

Let me give you an illustration. Saul, son of Kish, first king of Israel, offered a sacrifice instead of waiting for Samuel the prophet. And later he failed again by not wiping out the Amalekites, as the Word of the Lord had commanded him to do (1 Sam 15). I want every man that can hear my voice to remember this about Saul: Saul did not listen to the Word of God and therefore he failed. Let's look at his failures. He failed in his vocation. He failed in his family. And he failed himself. And what a pathetic figure at the end of his life...a suicide. The Word of God is clear. *Listen! Listen* when it is revealed. It is here for you. And it is here to give you the skill to live.

Notice the word fool. Do you know who he is? He's the man who speaks of God rather casually. Now I can remember S. Lewis Johnson from this pulpit, 1970, saying this,

"He is not 'the man upstairs'! We do not speak of the Triune God in such human terms. That is offensive to His person and it is offensive to everything that He represents." Oh, 'he is the man upstairs that helped me catch a pass', 'hit a home run', et cetera. Such men, our writer tells us, are pitiful and blind—And notice the last clause, '...they don't even know they're doing wrong.'

I'll tell you how seriously one should take God. Look at the word 'steps' in your text. If the high priest took a misstep in the Holy of Holies, he would die instantly. Leviticus 15:31. You might want to put that in your margin. Here's what the text of Scriptures says. 'They would die because they defiled what was His place on Earth'. It was the Holy of Holies and men were to watch their 'steps' in the presence of God!

Verse 2 is composed of three parts. First a command; then a motive clause; followed by a second command that is implied by that motive. Here is the first command, (vs2a) "Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God." Now we might consider this text alongside the command of Christ Himself and you might put down in your margin a text like Matthew 6:7-8. Here's what our Lord said, 'And when you pray, do not keep babbling like pagans for they think they'll be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him'. Christ's clear meaning: Speak to God directly. Be to the point. Do not fill in with repetitive phrases or superfluous talk: Because God already knows what you need.

The motive of this command from our Teacher (vs2b) is because of the vast difference between God and ourselves. In other words: Your God is sovereign; Your God is in control; He is grand; He is great; and He is eternal. And you and I are but dust. We are temporal; here today and gone tomorrow. So how is it that you and I are to speak to such a King as The One we serve? And the answer according to the man with the powerful mind, is — Briefly. "...let your words be few", he says: And that is your second command.

The link to Verse 3 is a bit elusive, but the word 'dream' here is probably a reference to daydreams that reduce worship to an irreverent behavior. 'God', says 'the

man with the powerful mind', 'is not impressed by much talk which is bound up in folly' (And verse 7 also buttresses this thought).....I grieve that many, if not most, of our pulpit messages today are filled with trivia as well as so much attention is given to focusing upon man (who alone is the measure of all things rather than God). In a day and a time when our words should be few and our words should be reverent, I think of how displeased the Lord is by the behavior that is exhibited in the place where the sheep should be able to come to hear the Word of God delivered to them in a reverent way that is meaningful, and powerful, and accompanied by the Holy Spirit.

Now, I'd like to say just a word about Believers Chapel. The open meeting in the evening is a worship service. It is not like many, many, many churches where you have a pastor get up in the evening service and deliver a sermon or a lecture. It is an open meeting and that disorients a lot of people. They don't like the silence of the meeting. I find the silence wonderful; time to be quiet before the Lord and to meditate. The focus of the meeting is upon the elements; the cup—His blood; the bread—His body. And men are to step forward to take the meeting and be vocal in running that meeting with prayer, with a hymn; and men with the gift of utterance should come prepared to deliver a text. Be brief, be to the point, and be edifying to everyone by pointing to Christ: Whom we are there to worship. That's the evening meeting. And it should be done in such a way that the elders of this church can just stand back in amazement at how the men of this church have so much depth and maturity that they can carry this meeting to the end. I got those thoughts from S. Lewis Johnson 30 years ago; meeting back over here in the parlor with a group of seminary students: I've never forgotten it.

Now Verse 4. Our Teacher addresses the issue of vows. Like a sacrifice, a vow for the Old Testament saint was a tribute to God. When taking a vow, the worshiper committed themselves to undertake a certain action: Like a sacrifice or a dedication. An example of this would be a text like Genesis 28:20-22. You might want to put that text in your margin. Here's what it says, 'Where Jacob, upon seeing the ladder in a dream at Bethel, made a commitment of his life to God and he set up a pillar at that place and called it God's house.' Now the Teacher here warns people to fulfill your vows; keep

your commitments. Keep the commitments you've taken upon yourself before the Lord, for indeed the Scriptures would confirm such a force. See Proverbs 20:25 for an example; "It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows." Next, the motive clause is found at the end of Verse 4, 'To go against your vow, God will take you as a fool'.

And now our fourth and final 'better' (vs5), "It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it." So here, more than warning people to fulfill their vows, he encourages them not to make vows in the first place. Verse 6a, the command: "Do not let your mouth lead you into sin." The word translated 'mistake' (vs 6b) in your NIV, I believe, must be understood in light of two Old Testament passages. You might want to make a note of these in your margin: Leviticus 4:2-35 and Numbers 15:22-31. Now those two sections of Scripture contrast a sin committed in ignorance to a sin that is deliberate and intentional. Our word 'mistake' is associated with the former, a sin in ignorance. The point of this verse: 'You may make whatever claim you want regarding your vow, but God sees all and knows all'. I believe that the emphasis for this entire section is summarized in the latter part of Verse 7: 'Stand in awe of God'. And it is here, for the first time in the book, that 'the man with the powerful mind' tells us literally to "fear God": Fear Him!

Now let me just say a quick word about vows. As believers in Christ, you and I are free concerning our relationship with God. I would never want to interfere with your personal commitments to Him in any way. Vows for me fall under the category of your personal relationship. Your vows, whether you choose to make them or not, are your vows; and you need to keep them that way: personal and private. That's between you and the LORD. I never would say to anyone that vows are not in the New Testament; or they're not New Testament teaching. So I don't say that. What I do say, and say rather emphatically, is this: "Don't violate your conscience. Never violate your conscience and in all ways and in all things do what you know is pleasing to the LORD."

Two points of personal application. First, I remind everyone here that is married or contemplating marriage that you said those vows to one another and to God; and we, as witnesses, all heard them. Think about that!

Secondly: Do you remember the greatest revival in the Bible? Nineveh, under the leadership of the disobedient prophet, Jonah. Now turn to Jonah 2; You see, due to his renegeing on his commitment, Jonah took a ride on a whale. You ever had a ride on a whale? Well, I have, and they're not very pleasant. And that ride comes from not being where you're supposed to be and from not doing what you're supposed to doing. Now from the belly of the fish, here is Jonah's testimony:

When my life was ebbing away,
I remembered you, LORD,
and my prayer rose to you,
to your holy temple.

Those who cling to worthless idols
forfeit the grace that could be theirs.
But I, with a song of thanksgiving,
will sacrifice to you.
What I have vowed I will make good.
Salvation comes from the LORD."

Jonah 2: 7-9

Question: Does God honor the man who keeps his vow? Would you notice your text: The very next event in the life of Jonah, Verse 10, "The LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land."

Could it be my friends; could it be that you are trapped, locked up, and tied into the very circumstances that you're in right now because you have not made good on your commitment to the LORD? Well, if I follow Jonah, no doors are going to swing open for you. For you see, the Scripture says "...the LORD commanded the fish...". God is the opener of doors.

Now finally, Verses 8-9, our 'man with the powerful mind' observes political oppressors. Life 'under the sun' is filled with excess bureaucracy; what you and I call 'red tape'. Franz Delitzsch, in his commentary, believes the picture here is of a higher official fleecing those lower until they are so poor that they have nothing left to give to the higher official. And thereafter, the poor stay permanently under their oppression. Ferdinand Hitzig saw this verse as officials protecting each other against the rights of people they govern. He said the officials protect each other's advantages. Well, we sure see a lot of that in politics today, don't we?

The key word translated in the NIV is the word 'eyed': vs8 "...eyed by a higher one...". The verb means 'to watch'. And the question is in what sense does an official *watch* over another? Who really knows? But what is clear, or clearly described, is the bureaucracy. And what he is describing is government's self-absorption, even in the chain-of-command on down the list. What he is telling us (and remember this when you vote next year): The Bible says, 'Big government is destructive'. It's destructive to a government, to a society. Notice his words here; 'oppressive with a deprivation of justice and righteousness'. In other words, in our life 'under the sun', the best that we could do with our organizational scheme and so forth, is to create a maze of madness. And the end result: People remain poor.

We've thrown billions at education and poverty and we've thrown billions and billions at the needy. And 'the poor we still have with us'; for Christ's Word is true (John12:8). Welcome to 'the system' for this is the best that we can do 'under the sun'. But notice if you're king. (vs9): Ah, if you're king, you'll do all right. You'll do quite well. So, life 'under the sun': It's the powerful against the weak. It's the oppressor against the oppressed. This is life. Sit back, bask in it, enjoy it. It's 'under the sun'.

Now I said our lesson was built around the betters. 'Better' the key word to the section. And we must believe there is something *better* than this! And my friends, there is. There is something far better than this life 'under the sun'. It is the Son, S-O-N. It is the Lord Jesus Christ. It is getting out of the horizontal and living a life in the vertical. It is daily communion with God through His Word: And prayer that He hears.

And communion in fellowship with other believers like at Believers Chapel. Friends for a lifetime, friends that love you, pray for you, and care about you. There's nothing for sale here. It's all about Him. That's Believers Chapel. It's all about Him: And we want to serve Him, our great God and our great Savior.

Know that if you don't know Him, you don't have life. What you have is existence. You're just buying time. You're between the dusts; 'the dust you were made with and the dust you're going to return to'. But to know Him is to know life, and that's what I invite you to receive in the quietness of your heart.

Believe the Word of God. Believe the Scriptures that Christ is God and He died for the sins of sinners. And if you will embrace that truth, you will enter into the greatest of all relationships. You will find purpose, and meaning, and joy like you have never seen before. In the darkest hours of your life, you will have a strength and a purpose; because that's what He delivers. That's our God. Won't you come to know Him?

Now don't miss next week. It's the topic you've been waiting for: MONEY. And if you'll bring a friend, we'll even give you a discount!

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