

STUDY 4 || *ECCLESIASTES 4&5*

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

To be or *not to be*, that is the question Hamlet, son of the murdered King of Denmark asks in one of the most famous plays of all time.

Have your most Shakespearean group member read the words of Hamlet out loud:

Hamlet - Act III, Scene I. (*A room in a castle*)

*To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take Arms against a Sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them: to die, to sleep
No more; and by a sleep, to say we end
the heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks
that Flesh is heir to? 'Tis a consummation
devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep,
To sleep, perchance to Dream; aye, there's the rub,
for in that sleep of death, what dreams may come,
when we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
must give us pause.*

By the fourth chapter of Ecclesiastes, we're getting used to the Teacher's bleak/brutally honest outlook on life. In response to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and the sea of troubles life brings, the Teacher makes Hamlet look like an optimist. He concludes not only the dead to be happier than the living, but "better than both is he who has not yet been" (Ecc 4:3).

TO BE OR NOT TO BE...

1. **Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-3** and discuss why you think the Teacher protests that it's better not to have ever even seen the sun.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:4-16.

2. The Teacher's sketching out a bit of a list for us in chapter four. What's foolish, what's *hevel* (meaningless, ungraspable, vapour), and what's better. As a group, work through the three areas in 4.4-16, and note which is which.

It's foolish....

It's hevel....

It's better...

The Teacher has concluded that grasping at wealth and success and pleasure is like chasing the wind. "Preach it brother" you might say. But now he turns to religion.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE... RELIGIOUS

Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-7.

3. The Teacher says instead of assuming you have something to offer God, you should “guard your steps when you go to the house of God” (v1). What’s his practical advice?

You shouldn’t.....

You should....

4. In chapter 5 we’ve been introduced to a new kind of fool. And what’s foolish is that he or she is too religious! What might the religious fool be hoping to gain and why won’t it work?
5. It’s confronting to face the possibility that you may be approaching your Christian faith as just another futile area of “grasping at gain”. Where can you see the temptation to do this?

“Those who believe they have pleased God by the quality of their devotion and moral goodness naturally feel that they and their group deserve deference and power over others. The God of Jesus and the prophets, however, saves completely by grace. He cannot be manipulated by religious and moral performance--he can only be reached through repentance, through the giving up of power. If we are saved by sheer grace we can only become grateful, willing servants of God and of everyone around us.”

Timothy Keller, 'The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism'

“Think of people you consider fanatical. They're overbearing, self-righteous, opinionated, insensitive, and harsh. Why? It's not because they are too Christian, it's because they are not Christian enough. They are fanatically zealous and courageous, but they are not fanatically humble, sensitive, loving, empathetic, forgiving, or understanding as Christ was... What strikes us as overly fanatical is actually a failure to be fully committed to Christ and his gospel.”

Timothy Keller, 'The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism'

TO BE OR NOT TO BE... GRATEFUL

In the rest of chapter 5 the Teacher continues his theme. He’s said it’s better not to live than to live this vaporous life (4:1-3). He’s said it’s better not to make vows and offerings to God than to do it badly thinking you’ve gained anything by it (5:1-7). Now he says it’s better to have no money than to have it and to think it’ll satisfy you or think you can keep it! (5:8-17) So what can you do?

Read the conclusion from 5:18-20.

6. What’s the best you can do in this life under the sun?

According to the Teacher, there’s an irony in all our chasing around. Just like Adam and Eve, we end up grasping at what we think we want, (and giving ourselves anxiety and grief), rather than just enjoying what we’ve been given. We’ll never catch the wind, but if we stop we might just catch a nice cool breeze, enjoy our work and food, and be grateful to God.

GOSPEL WISDOM

As we turn to the pages of the New Testament, the apostle Paul sheds some more light on the wisdom of receiving God’s gift, and the foolishness of chasing after worthless things.

Read Philippians 3:4-9.

Philippians 3:4-9

⁴ If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. ⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

7. The Teacher feels the weight of the cumulative effect of humans chasing pointless gains every which way, suggesting it might actually be better *not to be* at all. In light of the gospel, the apostle Paul’s suggesting a *new way to be* when it comes to gain. What’s he saying?

8. How would your life choices be different if you really did “consider everything loss” compared with the gain of knowing Christ?

9. In light of the fullness of the gospel story as we live life “under the sun”, finish this sentence:

Better to
Than to