



# The World Is Broken

## Introduction

Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16

Julian Barnes is frightened. He knows that he shouldn't be, but he is. He can't help himself. You see, Julian Barnes is afraid to die.

The famous English writer — the author of *Flaubert's Parrot* and other prize-winning novels — formerly called himself an atheist. Then he claimed to be an agnostic, because in his opinion there is no good reason to think there is a God. This would further imply that there is no such thing as life after death, and therefore “Nothing to be Frightened Of”, which is the title of one of his latest books.

Yet the sober truth is that Julian Barnes is desperately afraid to die. The *New York Times Book Review* correctly diagnoses his condition as thanatophobia — the fear of death. Barnes thinks about death every day and admits that sometimes in the night he is “roared awake” and “pitched from sleep into darkness, panic and a vicious awareness that this is a rented world.” Awake and utterly alone, he finds himself beating his pillow with a fist and wailing, “Oh no Oh No OH NO” ...

Ecclesiastes faces up to our fears by asking the hardest questions that anyone can ask about the meaning of the universe, the existence of God, and the life to come. The difficult question of death comes up again at the end of chapter 3, where the Preacher poses a problem and comes up with an answer, only to discover that there is a problem with the answer too. He has been thinking about all the injustice in the world and about his longing for God to address it at the Final Judgment. But thinking about that great and terrible day causes him to wonder again what will happen when we die.<sup>1</sup>

## Open It

1. **What's something that broke in your home or vehicle and caused you a lot of frustration?**

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<sup>1</sup> Ryken, Philip Graham. *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters (Preaching the Word)*. Article: From Dust to Glory (Ecclesiastes 3:16–4:3). Crossway, 2010.

## Read It

**Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16**

## Explore It

2. **What did the preacher see in the place of righteousness and justice? (3:16)**
  
3. **What is the inescapable end of both beasts and the children of man? (3:19-20)**
  
4. **Who does the preacher believe needs comfort? (4:1)**
  
5. **From where does much of our ambition in working hard originate? (4:4)**
  
6. **Will success and popularity last after we die? (4:16)**

## Apply It

### **The Way We Live is Broken (3:16-4:3)**

The writer laments the injustice he observes in the world, as people are unfair and wicked to one another. Such realities would be intolerable to contemplate except for the knowledge that “God will judge the righteous and the wicked” and will right wrongs (vv. 16–17). The author also considers another injustice—that human beings and animals alike are mortal: “What happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other” (v. 19).<sup>2</sup>

7. **What is one form of injustice or oppression in our world that breaks your heart?**

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<sup>2</sup> Wellum, Stephen J., *ESV Systematic Theology Study Bible: Theology Rooted in the Word of God: English Standard Version*. Crossway, 2017.

8. Why is death such a painful and scary thing for so many people?
9. In verse 21, the preacher sounds unsure about what happens to the human spirit after death. What does Hebrews 9:26b-29 tell us about what happens after we die? Does that give you hope or despair?
10. How can the people of our church regularly reinforce God's view of physical death? Read one of the following if you need a hint: Philippians 1:21-23, Revelation 21:4 or Luke 23:42-43.

### **The Work We Do is Broken (4:4-12)**

Various examples are now given to illustrate the uselessness of so much of man's hard work. First there is the case of the man who can never relax and enjoy his work because he is continually driving himself in order to be ahead of his competitors. Another does not work at all and ultimately destroys himself. Both extremes should be avoided. Better that a man be relaxed and enjoy what he does than drive himself on by ambition only to create difficulties for himself.

Another unhappy example is that of the man who lives alone without family or friends and wears himself out making money. He himself has no time to enjoy the fruits of his labors and he has no dependents who will enjoy them after him. Various proverbs are added to show that one who cuts himself off from others is really harming himself, for cooperation with others increases a person's security.<sup>3</sup>

**11. Have you ever observed someone who struggled with workaholism? What observations did you notice about their life, either positive or negative?**

**12. What place should hard work have in the life of a believer? Do you have any Scripture to back up your response? Visit Colossians 3:23-24, 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12, or Acts 20:35 for some guidance.**

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<sup>3</sup> Fleming, Donald C., The International Bible Commentary. Zondervan, 1986.

**13. Which of the temptations here do you struggle against in your own life? (Workaholism, laziness, envy of neighbors' success, isolation.) Is there a change you need to make?**

**14. Have you come across any godly advice for those who place too much of their value on what they can accomplish at work?**

#### **The Imprint We Leave is Broken (4:13-16)**

Making another abrupt shift of topic, Qohelet used the story in these verses to illustrate that political advancement under the sun is also futile. Though not entirely clear, the plot line of this story seems to go as follows. There is an old king who is a fool because he does not listen to advice or warning (v. 13). He is replaced by a youth who is far wiser, even though he once was poor and even in prison (v. 14). But even this young king's wisdom is not enough, because he is replaced by another youth who is very popular (vv. 15-16a). The popularity of this third King, however, is only temporary (v. 16b). This loose narrative indicates that people can attain power through seniority, wisdom, or popularity. But in each case the result is the same. Political power is vanity (hebel) because it is fleeting.<sup>4</sup>

**15. While many of us will never hold any political power, it's true that our earthly impact will only last so long. Can you remember any of the legacy of your grandparents? Great-grandparents? How does the fleeting nature of our earthly imprint make you feel?**

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<sup>4</sup> Finkbiner, David. The Moody Bible Commentary: Ecclesiastes. Moody Publishing, 2014.

16. How would you like to be remembered by those who live in the years following your death?

17. What hope do you glean from the following verses about the eternal impact we can make?

Luke 12:32-34

1 Corinthians 15:57-58

18. Write a 2-3 sentence prayer asking God to shape your lifestyle into one that will make an eternal impact.