

Wisdom For Life And Ministry

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.
(Proverbs 1:7 ESV)*

*Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof leads others astray.
(Proverbs 10:17 ESV)*

*'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.'
(Job 28:28 ESV)*

*The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.
(Matthew 12:42 ESV)*

Friendship (In A Dark And Dangerous World)

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Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

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Introduction:

Good morning church. I'd like to invite you to open your Bibles to Ecclesiastes 4:9; that's on page 555. Ecclesiastes is the book right after the Book of Proverbs and right before Song of Solomon. We don't read from this book of the Bible very often in church for the simple reason that it's weird and depressing. I've mentioned already that the wisdom portion of your Bible is laid out kind of like a group of books on a shelf. They're intended to be studied as a unit. Proverbs gives us all the general principles. It tells us the MORAL CODE of the universe and it shows us how things are supposed to work. But of course because of sin and because of the fall, things very often DON'T WORK the way they were designed and intended to do. That's why we have the Book of Job and the Book of Ecclesiastes. J. Stafford Wright in his fabulous commentary on Ecclesiastes puts it this way. He says:

"The Wisdom writings have a twofold scope. First they set out the rules of life for an individual who wishes to be a member of a prosperous society and who looks for the right way to build up a God-fearing conscience. These rules form the Book of Proverbs. Society, however, is not ideal; mankind has a fundamental twist, and there will always be cases where a person finds things happening to him that he cannot reconcile with the promises of Proverbs. He may suffer when he expects the temporal blessings of God, and others who deserve punishment may prosper. This second scope of Wisdom writings is taken up by Job and Ecclesiastes, each in its own way."¹

That is a phenomenal introduction to the Wisdom Corpus of the Bible as a whole!

Proverbs tells you how the world SHOULD BE and how it CAN BE but then Job and Ecclesiastes tell you how it FEELS and WHAT YOU SHOULD DO when everything goes horribly and tragically WRONG.

¹ J. Stafford Wright, *Ecclesiastes* in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* Volume 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 1144.

That's good; that's very helpful and that's very realistic.

Now what's interesting, with respect to the topic of FRIENDSHIP is that FRIENDSHIP is actually explored in BOTH PARTS of the wisdom corpus. The Book of Proverbs has a lot to say about friendship because FRIENDSHIP is part of the original design. God MADE US to be SOCIAL CREATURES – do you remember that?

Back in Genesis 2:18 God said:

“It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” (Genesis 2:18 ESV)

So friendship is part of the design. We weren't made to walk alone – community is part of the CODE and therefore it is a frequent topic of discussion in the Book of Proverbs.

AND – it also shows up in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

It's one of the few positive things that Qohelet says in the whole book. The general message of Ecclesiastes is that the world STINKS – it's broken and everything you do eventually succumbs to the power of the curse. It's all meaningless. No matter how smart you are, or rich you are or good you are – everybody fails, everybody fades and everybody dies. Remember Ecclesiastes is exploring the reality of the world AFTER THE FALL but BEFORE the REDEMPTION THAT IS OURS IN CHRIST. And in that space, everything is falling apart BUT there are a few blessings still remaining.

And the one that gets the most ink in Ecclesiastes is the blessing of human friendship.

Friendship is a gift from God. It's good. It's really good. You need it – in every season of life – and ALL THE MORE when things get dark and dangerous; that's the message that the Preacher has for us in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

So with all that being said, hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 9.

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ 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! ¹¹ Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? ¹² And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Now I'm going to guess that if you've ever heard a sermon on this passage it has been at a Christian wedding. The Bible treats marriage as a particularly intimate form of human friendship and Christians have typically understood this passage as being about human friendship but as having legitimate application to the matter of covenant marriage. So for example Derek Kidner says about the principles presented here:

“they apply to many forms of partnership, not least (though not explicitly) to marriage.”²

I think that’s fair and it gives us a couple of different ways to hear the message of this passage. If you want to you can hear this as a message about marriage – even though I am intending to speak generally about all forms of human friendship.

The Preacher – which is the name we usually give to the author of Ecclesiastes – The Preacher says that friendship is better. Just look up in your Bibles at the paragraph BEFORE the one we just read. There he talks about the misery of the lonely individual. Individualism is VANITY – it is foolish and ultimately pointless he says in verses 7-9:

Again, I saw vanity under the sun:⁸ 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, so that he never asks, “For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?” This also is vanity and an unhappy business. (Ecclesiastes 4:7–8 ESV)

Being alone – doing life by yourself is FOOLISHNESS he says. What’s the point of that? Why wake up in the morning and work your hands to the bone if you don’t have other people to share anything with? What are you going to do with it? Again you’re just a silly little bird gathering up piles of bright and shiny things. Stop it. And think about what you are doing. Human life only makes sense in the context of meaningful relationships.

That’s what he’s saying – and that’s where you get the “two are better than one” statement at the beginning of this section, in verse 9. So, let’s look at what he’s saying.

Two Are Better Than One Because:

1. They have a good return for their labour

It is amazing what two people can get done in a couple of hours. A few weeks ago my dad and I decided to tackle the disaster area known as my front garden. My dad is a great gardener but I am not. My goals are modest: I just don’t want to embarrass my neighbours. I don’t want to affect property values. But my time is limited. I try to keep Friday afternoons free because as you know, Saturdays fill up with weddings and other church events so I need to do all of my “household chores” on the odd Friday afternoon when I have it free and my front garden had been long overlooked and neglected. You know it’s bad when ladies from the church volunteer to come over and help if you need it. That’s just a way of saying politely – you really do need to address your front garden. So, my dad and I borrowed a truck from a friend at the church and we prepared ourselves to get dirty.

When I first looked at the thing I almost gave in to despair. It had probably been growing wild for 10 years now and it looked like it needed to be bulldozed. But I was amazed after 3 hours of the two of us digging things up, cutting things down, moving this to there and that to here – that it actually looked really good. It was completely transformed. I’m not saying I’m a professional, I’m just saying that I have completely fooled my neighbours into thinking I know something about gardening.

It’s amazing how much you can get done in a short period of time when you’re working with a friend.

²Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, ed. J. A. Motyer, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 50.

That's the point.

In this fallen world – when work is particularly frustrating – when the Second Law of thermodynamics is the only thing that seems to be working properly - friendship is absolutely necessary. Some tasks are so big – some gardens are so tangled – that it would be vanity – it would be arrogant, stubborn FOOLISHNESS to attempt to address them on your own. Therefore there is WISDOM and BLESSING in addressing those issues with a friend.

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour.

And two are better than one, he tells us because:

2. If they fall one will lift the other up

The Preacher seems to have in mind the dangers of travelling in a dark and hostile world. If you were walking at night and you fell into a pit that pit might end of being your grave; but if you are travelling with a friend then your friend can lift you up. That's the basic idea – but the metaphor obviously means to communicate far more than that. Michael Eaton for example says here:

The proverb, however, looks beyond physical mishap; slips of judgment and other types of 'falling by the wayside' equally need a helping hand. ³

Life is a journey and that journey is dangerous and hard. It is VANITY not to understand not to understand that. It is ARROGANT, WILLFUL FOOLISHNESS to think that you can make your way through life, from start to finish without ever needing to be rescued by a friend.

That is true in terms of PHYSICAL danger and that is true in terms of SPIRITUAL danger.

You know, one of the things I don't understand about our current evangelical culture is our present attitude toward the issue of church membership. It is extraordinarily common today to meet people who will say: "I am a Christ follower. I am saved. I love Jesus. I read my Bible but I don't belong to any particular church. I don't need that and I don't see how that is required."

That is incredibly common.

And that is incredibly arrogant and foolish.

That is to suppose that you will be able to make it from the start of your spiritual journey to the end without ever falling into a pit – without ever being deceived. Without ever being TRAPPED by an addiction or a lust or a false teaching. That is to ASSUME that you don't NEED what Jesus in his wisdom suffered and laboured to give you.

Jesus is BUILDING HIS CHURCH – who in the world are you to think that you don't need that? The Apostle Paul thought you would need it. He told Christians to watch out for each other. He said:

³Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 18 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 109.

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. (Galatians 6:1 ESV)

Jude, the brother of Jesus says almost exactly the same thing. He tells his people:

have mercy on those who doubt; ²³ save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh. (Jude 1:22–23 ESV)

So the Bible says that some people are going to fall in the ditch, some people are going to fall into the fire and other people are going to fall in the sewer.

That's going to happen – that could happen to you – and when it does you better hope you have a friend who loves you enough to come get you.

That's what the Bible says.

The Bible is very realistic. It is telling you that you will not always be smart enough to spot the dangerous error. It's telling you that you will not always be strong enough to resist the siren's song. You're going to stumble. You're going to trip. You're going to get sucked in – so you better have friends who know their Bibles, who are filled with the Spirit and who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty.

It's a hard world out there brothers and sisters, filled with many dangers, toils and snares and it's only getting worse. So if it was true then, it's even more true now: Two are better than one because if they fall – when they fall – the other can lift him up.

And thirdly, two are better than one because:

3. If they lie down together they can keep warm

Again it seems like the Preacher is thinking in terms of life as a dangerous journey. It's a hard road – and at night, it's a cold road but you can survive if you huddle together in order to keep warm and preserve your body heat.

The Tyndale Old Testament Commentary says here:

“The proverb speaks of companionship in adversity, temptation or grief.”⁴

When the world is cold, hard or sad having a close friend can keep you alive and warm.

Now this is something that the church CAN do really well.

According to a study written up by Miriam Neff in Christianity Today a couple of years ago, widows lose 75% of their friendship network when they lose a spouse.⁵ So just when your own health is starting to go and just when your own strength is starting to fail – just when your world is getting very dark and very cold – very often that's when people find themselves most alone and most exposed. And in today's world when people

⁴Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 18 of Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 109.

⁵ As cited by Gina Dalfonzo in *One By One* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 201.

are having fewer kids and those kids are moving further and further away for work the danger is all the more acute.

And the opportunity for the church is all the more obvious and urgent.

Gina Dalfonzo, in her book “One By One” which reflects upon the issue of singleness and loneliness, particularly among Millennials, speaks about the impact that her parents made on her in terms of how they offered friendship within their local church. She says:

“My father did this for his widowed friend, driving him to the hospital for his surgery and visiting him frequently while he was there – even while he also had to care for my mother, who happened to be recovering from her own surgery at the same time. ... Seeing them come forward to support and care for this man did my heart more good than all the handwringing about demographic trends I’ve ever seen. It gives me hope that one day, when I need it, there will be people who do the same for me.”⁶

Are you hearing that?

That’s a really interesting comment from a remarkably articulate observer of the Millennial generation. Gina Dalfonzo knows that her generation is relationally challenged. They are getting married later – if at all. They are having fewer kids – if any at all. And they are starting to run the numbers and they are starting to be afraid as they think about the long, lonely night that is coming.

But the church shines out as a light.

Because there – when we’re at our best – there there is FRIENDSHIP, and SUPPORT and COMPANIONSHIP that can sustain hurting people through the dark and lonely nights of the soul.

That’s what the church can offer – that’s what the covenant community has always offered. Proverbs 27:10:

Do not forsake your friend and your father’s friend, and do not go to your brother’s house in the day of your calamity. Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away. (Proverbs 27:10 ESV)

Are you hearing that?

Within the covenant community we have always attempted to nurture the value of friendship – specifically inter-generational friendship – even over and above the value of biological friendship.

Why?

Because the world is broken.

Family is broken.

Our little chicks fly away.

Work is hard so sometimes we have to go a long way from the nest in order to find a worm.

⁶ Gina Dalfonzo, *One By One* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 201-202.

And therefore:

Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away. (Proverbs 27:10 ESV)

It is proximity that SAVES on the day of peril – that's what the Preacher in Ecclesiastes is saying here:

if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? (Ecclesiastes 4:11 ESV)

Proximity matters!!

Therefore we need to stay CLOSE to one another in the day of peril.

That is something that the church CAN OFFER that people in this culture will not be able to find anywhere else. Close, intergenerational, caring community is going to be the greatest evangelism strategy ever invented in the next 30 years.

Let's build it now.

Let's invest heavily in it now.

Because this world is going to need it. And you and I are going to need it.

It's getting cold out there – but it's better when we lie down together.

Fourthly, two are better than one the Preacher says, because:

4. Though an enemy might prevail against the one who is alone, two will stand against him

Now remember, Ecclesiastes is a book that tells us the truth. It doesn't tell us how the world should be – it tells us how the world is. And the world IS filled with enemies and adversaries.

The New Testament is honest about this too; the Apostle Peter says:

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8 ESV)

The Apostle Paul was honest about this too he said:

for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. (1 Corinthians 16:9 ESV)

There are great Gospel opportunities in this world – and also many adversaries. You aren't being BIBLICAL and you aren't being WISE if you aren't acknowledging that.

The Preacher here in Ecclesiastes is once again using the metaphor of a dangerous journey. On this road of life, he is saying, there are enemies – there are bandits who will come at you out of the shadows of the night.

If you are alone then you will be easily overpowered, but if you are with a friend, then you stand better than a fighting chance.

The devil is a bully and he always targets the isolated and the alone. Therefore Christian friendship is often more than enough to send him looking for other targets.

One of the most amazing stories to come out of World War II concerns a church leader in Bulgaria named Metropolitan Kyril. When the Nazis rounded up the Jews in his city and herded them into a barbed-wire enclosure, he decided to intervene. The train that was supposed to take the Jews to Auschwitz pulled up at the station. The S.S. guards were just about ready to load the Jews into the box cars that would take them to the gas chambers when suddenly, out of the darkness, Metropolitan Kyril appeared. He was a tall, thin man, and as an Orthodox priest, he wore a mitre on his head, which must have made him appear like a giant as he emerged out of the darkness. He was wearing his black robes and his grey beard hung down low over them and marching behind him were the members of his congregation.

Metropolitan Kyril went to the entrance of the barbed-wire enclosure, which was then surrounded by his supporters. When the Nazi guards tried to stop him, he laughed at them and pushed aside their guns. He went in among the Jews and as they surrounded him, crying hysterically, he raised his hands. He quoted from the Book of Ruth, declaring to his Jewish friends, "Whither thou goest, I will go. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God!"

The Nazi powers didn't quite know what to do with Metropolitan Kyril and so the guards were given new orders and the trains did not depart the yard and the Bulgarian Jews were set free.

That's the power of friendship and solidarity.

The devil is a bully and a coward and that's why it is the HEIGHT OF VANITY AND FOOLISHNESS to walk alone. You – he is not afraid of. But 2-3 together? With Christ himself in the midst? That is far more than he can manage – and that leads us to the final little phrase in our passage.

You'll notice that it does NOT quite line up with the others.

He's been telling us why 2 is better than 1 – but then all of the sudden he says:

5. A threefold cord is not quickly broken

So what's the 3? This has been a paragraph about why 2 is better than 1 – so who is the third?

Well some scholars say that this is just a typical Old Testament way of saying "how much more". As in – if two is better than 1 how much more 3? The more the merrier! The bigger the circle of friends, the safer and more secure you are – it could mean that – it probably does mean that – but it probably also means something else.

Matthew Henry says here:

Two together he compares to a *threefold cord*; for where two are closely joined in holy love and fellowship, Christ will by his Spirit come to them, and make the third⁷

⁷Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible (Unabridged)*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs:

Certainly – Old Testament and New – the presence and blessing of God is promised in the context of Christian friendship and unity. In Psalm 133 the Bible says:

¹ Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!

³ It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore. (Psalm 133:1,3 ESV)

Jesus in Matthew 18:20 says:

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:20 KJV)

Two are better than ONE, friends, but THREE is even better.

There is a promise on the table in these passages that I am eager to take hold of. It sounds to me as if God is saying that if we do what these passages are telling us to do – if we BUILD a FORTRESS and a STRONGHOLD for young and old, rich and poor alike – if we do not abandon our friends or our father's friends in the day of CALAMITY then God himself will come and DWELL AMONG US in a particularly POWERFUL WAY – am I reading that right? Do you want to see the presence and blessing of God fall on this place in a new and special way?

Then it's time for you to come in from the cold.

HOT COALS – SEPARATED FROM EACH OTHER SOON COOL AND DARKEN.

But together they remain alight. With Christ in the centre – they are eternally aflame. They are the light of the world. A city on a hill that cannot be hid.

It's getting dark out there friends. It's time for us to come together with Christ himself in the midst.

Thanks be to God, let's pray together.