

Ecclesiastes- Chapter 4

If you would be turning with me in your bibles over to the book of Ecclesiastes. Today we find ourselves settling into the 4th chapter. Our approach to this book has really been to go at a pretty fast pace. Much faster than the way we handle an epistle or even one of the gospels.

The fact is, there is a wealth of wisdom in this book, but this is one of those books that going through it too slow also leads to losing the context of the entire book. I love to do in depth studies a few verses, but not if that study lends us to losing sight of what the book is all about or the chapter for that matter.

Now so far as we have moved through the book things have not been too hard for us to grasp. Solomon is looking at life and he is primarily looking at it from the perspective of one who is living their lives “under the sun”. That is to say, he is looking to the one that is living their life apart from God.

And so far, what have we learned about the life of one that is living “under the sun”? We find that it has little meaning. Solomon sets forth in this book basically to see it all and do it all only to find that in the end- all things, all people, all life has to offer fades away. Nothing lasts. Life is fleeting. The same fate comes to the rich man as to the poor man when the preacher stands over the grave and says “dust to dust” and Solomon goes on to say that under the sun death itself teaches us nothing about what is beyond this life in and of itself.

That is to say, one doesn’t look at a grave and think there must be more because one is in the ground. But the fact is man in general throughout this world looks at that tomb and says there must be more because as Solomon reminded us in chapter 3 that God has placed eternity in the hearts of man. Most people on this earth believe in something more for the soul

of man whether it be the Buddhist or the Christian because God has placed eternity in the hearts of man in the face of the reality of cold, hard dirt.

Now, Solomon in this book does give us little tidbits along the way reflecting on God as he understands that life apart from God has no real meaning and he can’t seem to help that coming through at times as he builds up to that ultimate conclusion of fearing God, keeping his commandments and serving him while we can.

But again, most of this book is written from the futile perspective of the one that is living under the sun and not under heaven. So, from the perspective of life under the sun one should just enjoy life as much as you can because someday it will all come to a crashing end.

So now that I have lifted your spirits once again and turn our attention to chapter 4, I’m going to admit to you that this isn’t the easiest chapter to handle. I listened to 5 different sermons on this chapter some from people very well known and some less well known and honestly most of them you would hardly know that they were preaching from this chapter at all because they all went down the rabbit hole of preaching their favorite few verses whether it was slavery, suicide or friendship. The verses that best fit the focus of their ministry I suppose.

I’m going to endeavor not to do that and I hope I succeed.

Let’s read our chapter in its entirety before we begin,

Ecc 4:1 So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.

Ecc 4:2 Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive.

Ecc 4:3 Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

Ecc 4:4 Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit.

Ecc 4:5 The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh.

Ecc 4:6 Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.

Ecc 4:7 Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun.

Ecc 4:8 There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.

Ecc 4:9 Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour.

Ecc 4:10 For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up.

Ecc 4:11 Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone?

Ecc 4:12 And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Ecc 4:13 Better is a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished.

Ecc 4:14 For out of prison he cometh to reign; whereas also he that is born in his kingdom becometh poor.

Ecc 4:15 I considered all the living which walk under the sun, with the second child that shall stand up in his stead.

Ecc 4:16 There is no end of all the people, even of all that have been before them: they also that come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Let's turn back now our attention on verse 1.

Ecc 4:1 So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.

Truth is if you have lived long enough you have likely seen oppression of some sort or type. We look through history and we see how conquering nations would oppress the people they conquer. We look through history and we see people taken as slaves or sold into slavery by their parents. We can look at places like India or Thailand where there are a whole class of people that are untouchable, looked down on and treated differently because of their heritage. People oppressing people.

Then there are divisions and oppressions between the sexes in workplaces. There are homes where there is oppression of spouses and children. Abuses of all sorts.

Solomon in stating these things is not commenting on whether these oppressions are right or wrong. He is stating the fact that under the sun, that is apart from God, the tears of the oppressed find no place of comfort. There is no comforter for their souls.

You remember when the children of Israel were down in Egypt land oppressed in every way and God said he heard their cries. Knew their sorrows in Exodus 3:7. They had a comforter to hear them and he came for them to give liberty where liberty had been stripped away. Where oppression was daily. Israel wasn't living under the sun. They were living under heaven. They had a hope. They had a comforter.

The man who knows not God has no comfort in his oppression because life has no value. No meaning.

Solomon now says something in this verse that flips the script a little bit. He says that the

oppressor- the one who has power over someone else also goes through this life with no comforter.

Let's just put it in a nice way that maybe we might understand it a little more. Let's say that I am the boss of 50 employees. I might make more than the 50 put together and drive the nicest of cars while they have to take a bus and I might have the nicest of homes and they are living in shacks, but the responsibility of keeping the 50 honest and straight and doing their job right and not stealing or leading a rebellion in the workplace is a turmoil of the mind and a nice car and a nice bed doesn't always make for good sleep or rest.

Even the oppressor in the end is afflicted and under the sun there is no comforter for them as well. He is still trudging through the same futile existence. Another day, another dollar gained, another dollar spent.

Let's read on,

Ecc 4:2 Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive.

When someone dies of a disease they have fought for a long time maybe cancer or Alzheimer's we often say something to the effect of well their fight is over. They can rest now. For those that are saved we know we have that future hope of rest in Christ. That's a great hope for us to have.

But remember, Solomon is writing still from the perspective of one without God. The one who thinks that the bone yard in the end is the end whether they be righteous or unrighteous.

Solomon says he looks around the world and he sees oppression. It's all over the place. And he sees that the ones that are oppressed have nothing to comfort them and the ones who are oppressing have no comfort for their souls, so

you know what is better that not being oppressed or oppressing. Being dead. At least in being dead you don't have to worry about your existence anymore. Don't have to worry about how someone might treat you.

On the surface, it would appear, that dead men are at rest without worry of the toil of oppression or being oppressed. In fact, what is often written on the gravestone? Rest in peace.

In fact, many take their lives every year because they believe that the only peace they will ever have, the only rest they will ever have from the oppression of their own mind or their situation is to put an end to life itself. They don't see beyond the grave. They are not concerned with the thought of eternity in their heart. Only see what seems like the end. On average there are 160 suicide attempts every hour of every day in the United States. About 6 are successful.

But people look at death and think that certainly sounds better than what I'm living now. Solomon saw it too.

And then look at this verse.

Ecc 4:3 Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

Solomon says that the only one who is better off than the person who is dead is the person who has never been born. Now I have to keep saying this, but all of these statements this is the perspective of the one living apart from God.

This sentiment is not the only time we see this in the word of God. You remember Job when he came under the oppression of Satan? He was a man who lost everything. Job wished death for himself. His wife wished death for him. What a horrible state to be in folks. But in that state of mind he wished he had never been born at all.

Job 3:3 Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived.

In chapter 10 and verse 19 he states he would have rather have been carried straight to the grave from his mother's womb than to live the life that he was living right now.

I venture to say that there are some in the room or listening that has had that same fleeting thought a few times in your life. Wishing you would have never been born at all. And the truth is if all life amounted to was a heap of dust in the end you would be right. But that isn't all that a man is in the end is it?

Thank God he has placed eternity in our hearts and given us his word to know how to reach it.

Leaving the first three verses, Solomon now moves from the oppressions of this life that make you want to die to another topic of futility here.

Ecc 4:4 Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit

Our verse here is saying that Solomon looked around and saw all the travail. That is all the work, all the labor of man is because a man looks out at what his neighbor has and wants it or something better.

You know Solomon is not speaking in absolutes here. There have been people who have lived in this world throughout the centuries that have been happy living in the smallest of places and content to have very little in life. We have a whole tiny house revolution going on right now where people are all about the motto less is more. They are probably right too.

But for the rest of us we shop for the certain name purse or shoes or clothes because we are trying to keep up with those pesky Jones' that

seem to have all the latest gadgets, wear the best of clothes, drive the nicest of cars, and their homes are manicured and their grass is always greener on their side of the fence.

Truth be told, everyone seems to think his neighbor is better off than he is- living a happier life than we are. So, what do we do? We strive to keep up. Strive to have a nicer car, nicer home. Greener lawn.

Solomon says there is no end to this madness. Keeping up with the Jones' never works because he never stops improving. In the meantime, what you don't see is that Mr. Jones' is looking off his porch and thinking man the Smith's have got it made over there.

If only I didn't have all this stuff I wouldn't have to work so much and be stressed so much to pay for it all. And then...and then, maybe I could come home earlier, unwind a little more and enjoy dinner with my family and eat those kinds of steaks like I smell wafting over from the Smith's house made on that simple charcoal grill that seems to take forever, but smells and tastes sooooo much better than the steak cooked in 10 minutes on my \$1000 propane grill in my outdoor kitchen complete with a brick pizza oven that looks cool, but no one ever really uses.

Solomon says everybody is chasing something because they are envious over the Jones' or the Smith's and if not the neighbor next door it's the neighbor on the next block that catches your eye when you drive by and say to yourself man they got it made.

Solomon says this is all just vanity. Just chasing the wind.

Let's read on,

Ecc 4:5 The fool foldeth his hands together, and eateth his own flesh.

The last verse is the one who works, works, works to keep up with what the neighbors have and this verse we are presented with the fool

who won't work at all. That is what is meant by this phrase foldeth his hands together. He won't use his hands to work.

Now in this day and time that Solomon was writing, if you didn't work there wasn't a place to go to get food stamps and there weren't any food banks. You had nothing if you wouldn't work, you were left to be a beggar or a thief.

Solomon is juxtaposing two groups. The ones that work all the time and aren't happy and the ones who won't work and because they have nothing aren't happy. Both extremes lead to unhappy ends.

There has to be a better way than those two extremes right even under the sun? And that is what Solomon says in our next verse.

Ecc 4:6 Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.

I honestly love this verse. Let me read it to you from a couple of other more dynamic translations as well. I like more word for word translations 95 percent of the time, but sometimes word for word is hard for us to grasp and it is good to have a more dynamic translation to catch the meaning.

The CSB,

Ecc 4:6 Better one handful with rest than two handfuls with effort and a pursuit of the wind.

The NIV,

Ecc 4:6 Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

What Solomon is teaching us here is a real-life fact that transcends time and location. It is better to have less and have peace at the end of the day than to have more and nothing but anxiety because of it.

In Proverbs Solomon says,

Pro 30:8 Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me:

Pro 30:9 Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain.

Riches are not the answer to a good life if all it ever does is bring more trouble and more self-reliance. Truly going the way of the fool and having nothing is not the answer either.

But somewhere in between is the food convenient for me. The one handful with quietness- rest. That is what we should be striving for on this earth. Not the biggest and the best, but not the shelter either. Somewhere in between and being content with what we have rather than worrying about what we don't have. Truly godliness with contentment is a great gain.

Solomon continues in this thought of the one living under the sun toiling for the best of life in strife in the next verse.

Ecc 4:7 Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun.

Ecc 4:8 There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.

This is the sad statement that Solomon makes about the one who is striving for all manner of earthly goods so much that he never had time for the wife and kids. He has no brothers. He works all of his life to satisfy his soul which is never satisfied and, in the end,, he has no one even to leave it all too.

It's the ultimate dissatisfaction of life isn't it? After all there is nothing worse than the government taking it all.

Solomon now turns his focus away from the striving and chasing after the wind to the subject of friendship or really much more than that here companionship.

Let's read,

Ecc 4:9 Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour.

I can't read this verse without the echoes of Three Dog Night singing one is the loneliest number. Now it will be stuck in your head the rest of the day and that is far better than being stuck in mine.

But let's face it going through this life alone stinks. Everybody's looking for someone to help make it through. Solomon speaks of the greatest of friends in this life. Not always a husband and wife. Some people never marry but have a strong companionship and friendship. I think of Paul and Timothy and the bond they had together. Or Jonathan and David. Ruth and Naomi. Strong bonds. Strong relations.

Much of the success we have in life and many of our failures are the result of the friends we choose.

So, with that in mind we read.

Ecc 4:11 Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone?

Ecc 4:12 And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Solomon goes on to give examples of how two are better than one. The first example is not about having sexual relations. It is about keeping each other warm. I know we live in a little bit of macho part of the world where two guys close together would be thought of as gay, but in much of the world it is common to see men who are not gay holding each other-hugging each other.

Some of you all might remember Maria my wife's friend from Serbia. When her parents came to visit, I got all to familiar with having some big guy hug on me. It was a constant thing, but their culture. That is the kind of thing we are talking about here. Nothing more than that.

And of course, one of the benefits right away of a friend is one to help shield you from the attacks of another. It might be physical and it might be verbal. But a true friend has got your back.

We have here this threefold cord is not quickly broken. You often hear this verse used to describe the relationship of a husband, wife, and God. That might truly be a threefold cord that is not easily broken, but that is not what Solomon is alluding to here at all.

Remember he is looking at life from the vantage point of being under the sun. Life apart from God. The third cord in this is not talking about God. He means a friend is good. Three friends together are even better.

Now let's move on to our last section of verses, *Ecc 4:13 Better is a poor and a wise child than an old and foolish king, who will no more be admonished.*

Solomon names no names here and let's face it, Solomon knew a lot of kings. Married a lot of their daughters. Solomon starts this section with the simple statement that a child with nothing but wisdom is better off in this world than a man with it all and is so foolish that no one respects him.

Again, we read,

Ecc 4:14 For out of prison he cometh to reign; whereas also he that is born in his kingdom becometh poor.

Here we have a different guy. Solomon again gives us no names but says this king was a poor

man and was in prison before he came to power. He came to power in such a way that no doubt the people rejoiced. Get rid of that old foolish king in verse 13. This new guy can lead us. But the people will not be satisfied long even with the new wise king.

And when they are not happy with the new king, who do they look too? The one who was the son of the old foolish king. After all he was the heir to the throne.

Ecc 4:15 I considered all the living which walk under the sun, with the second child that shall stand up in his stead.

Ecc 4:16 There is no end of all the people, even of all that have been before them: they also that come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and vexation of spirit.

The second child is the foolish king's son. He will become king and replace the wise one and it won't be long before the people will no longer rejoice in him and the cycle will repeat again.

All the striving for lasting happiness and lasting happiness never comes under the sun.

So that brings us to the end of chapter. Not a lot of happiness here in this chapter outside of having a real friend. But again, this is looking at the vantage point of life under the sun and under the sun the best you can hope for is a quiet life and good friends.

Let me say this before we end, today if you are going through your life always striving and never fully attaining. If life seems just a mess and you wish you would have never been born. Let me ask you this? Are you living your life under the sun or are you living your life under heaven?

Solomon is teaching us life under the sun has no lasting value. No lasting happiness. Just a continual striving.

I hope that isn't you today. I hope that all your striving is for the kingdom that is to come. Chase after Christ instead of chasing after the wind that can never be grasped.