

September 1, 2019  
Sunday Evening Service  
Series: Ecclesiastes  
Community Baptist Church  
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Greer, SC 29650  
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## ISOLATIONISM FOSTERS FUTILITY Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

Several of us in this assembly are okay with having some time alone. Is that a good thing? It's not that we want to become hermits and go out and live in a cabin in the middle of the deep woods of Canada. Nor do we wish to copy Elijah and go live alone in a cave. At least I am not interested in that. But at the same time, many of us find contentment in being alone with a project, or a good book, or just taking a walk in the woods. An important question for introverts to ask is this: "Is it possible for us to completely fulfill the plan and will of God by being alone?"

The answer to that question is simply, "No." God created all things and pronounced them good. That included the creation of Adam. How long was Adam alone? Was Adam an introvert? Did Adam talk with the animals? It appears that, in the order of God's creation, Adam was alone with the animals for a period of time while he named them all. But it was not good for Adam to have no suitable helper, no partner like Himself. Regardless of how much we love our pets, our relationship with them is limited.

God made us in His image, part of which is to be social creatures, communicative beings, beings who interact with other beings. From the very beginning we see God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit conferring to "make man in OUR image." Therefore, it is not surprising to also find God walking in the garden communicating with the man and woman He created.

While a little time alone can be a good and therapeutic thing, being an isolationist is not. Solomon learned in his great experiment with life that being alone has consequences, is ultimately not the best, and, therefore, contributes to the vanity of life. Again, this part of the

experiment clearly points out that God must be an integral part of our lives in order to avoid the frustration and vexation of a meaningless life. Again, Solomon challenges us to remember our Creator and seek to bring glory to Him by doing what He commands.

### No One to Comfort (vv.1-3).

Another issue that contributes to the vanity of life, according to the preacher's experiment, is oppression with no comfort (v.1). That there is oppression is undeniable. We are forced to agree with Solomon when he concluded, *Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them (v.1a)!*

This first verse puts a lot of emphasis on oppression. Notice the mention of *oppression*, the *oppressed*, and the *oppressors*. The Hebrew word behind the English word oppress means (like the English) to abuse, treat disrespectfully, or cause suffering. Generally, it refers to a power or authority acting unjustly toward an underling.

The preacher saw many examples of this abuse in life. In his day, class abuse between the "haves" and the "have nots" was rampant. Slavery was the norm. Wives and children were considered to be property. The wealthy cheated the poor to become more wealthy. As in any culture, the oppression causes sorrow.

But who is there to comfort the oppressed? To comfort is not just to feel sorry for the suffering, but to demonstrate compassion. Demonstrating compassion for the oppressed requires a certain amount of sacrifice. This is where the socialists in our age fail. They claim to be concerned about the oppressed. However, reality eventually reveals that they are not concerned for the oppressed at all. Rather, socialists, throughout their comparatively brief history, have proven that they use the oppressed for their own political gain. In the end, the oppressed who look to the socialist for comfort find themselves more oppressed, more abused, more enslaved to power than they were.

That is also a fair description of the oppression in Solomon's day, where the powerful also oppressed the less powerful. The preacher observed, *On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them (v.1b)*. The great problem is

that the people who rob the society of justice are so powerful no one can resist. This is the scenario for rebellions and coups throughout history. Sometimes the oppressed are victorious over the mighty powers. Often they are not, and oppression continues or increases.

So it was in Solomon's day. Later in this book he writes, *For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, "What are you doing?"* (Ecclesiastes 8:4). Hence the problem in any and every age. Oppression is still an issue in many cultures. America does not suffer too severely from political abuse. But there is employer abuse, spiritual abuse from unrighteous pastors, or judicial abuse as attorneys distort the truth in the courtroom so that justice is not served. There are various forms or levels of parental oppression of children and spousal oppression.

History proves that the tendency for the powerful to abuse their power by oppressing their subordinates is ingrained in the sinful nature. Is it fair to conclude that from the outset Cain exercised extreme oppression on Abel? The record indicates that in the world of sin, the Golden Rule is actually: "He who has the gold makes the rules." Life can be a very discouraging environment in which to live.

The preacher concluded that oppression is so bad that maybe it is better not to be born (vv.2-3). Is it true that those who are dead are better off? That was Solomon's conclusion. *And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive* (v.2). To say that this is extreme pessimism is not an extreme conclusion.

Is life really so bad, so oppressive, that we would conclude that to be dead is better? In light of recently passed "Death with Dignity" laws, some people must come to that conclusion. This is where the road of grasping for passing things leads. Sin satisfies only for a season. That road always ends at a roadblock of abject disappointment and discouragement. The person who, even under oppression, concludes that life is not worth living is ignoring one very important truth—there is a God who comforts.

The reminder that there is a God should also cause us to wonder who decided you would be born? The preacher concluded, *But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun* (v.3). That is a very serious conclusion. It reminds us that the debate about who has authority over the unborn

is not a new debate. Would Solomon suggest that life is so evil that it is better to keep a child from being born into these evil deeds? Since you didn't have a choice about your birth, who was in control of the matter?

Of course someone will debate at this point that God must not be in control because mere humans destroy millions of babies around the world every day. Are those babies living souls? Yes. Does God allow humans to be murdered by other humans? Read the news daily and you will find your answer. Does God hold murderers responsible? Obviously. Consider Jesus' warning to Judas: *"The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born"* (Matthew 26:24).

Here Solomon almost seemed to forget about God's sovereign control in such matters. In his disillusionment with life, he agreed with Job who said, *"Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man is conceived'"* (Job 3:3). He sounds like Jeremiah in his deep discouragement. *Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, "A son is born to you," making him very glad* (Jeremiah 20:15). *Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?* (Jeremiah 20:18).

The preacher seemed to forget about the God of all comfort! Did he forget that he himself had concluded that our God is just and compassionate. *I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work* (Ecclesiastes 3:17). In the next chapter he will conclude that God will bring oppression into account: *If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them* (Ecclesiastes 5:8).

The just and righteous God comforts us. Paul offered this wonderful promise to Christians who might have wondered about oppression and comfort. *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God* (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Because God is so just and compassionate, it is fair to conclude that God's people are to be just and compassionate. Jesus taught that this is the characteristic of His followers. *"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me'"* (Matthew 25:34-40).

James reminded us that this is what real religion looks like. *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world* (James 1:27). There is plenty of oppression in life, but there are those of us who should offer comfort.

### **Better Alone Than in the Rat Race (vv.4-6).**

Not only is there oppression in life, but the very reasons to go to work seem suspect. The preacher discovered that competition drives industry (v.4). Or as Solomon put it, *"People strive out of envy."* *Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor* (v.4a).

Is this an issue in our world? Try to imagine the change in society if envy, jealousy, greed, and covetousness disappeared. There would be no more sports in which someone tries to become the champion by defeating their opponent. Certainly most murder, theft, kidnaping, rape, and adultery would cease. There would be no more presidential debates, or they would certainly change in character. Most news organizations and all talk shows would have nothing to say. How would your life change without envy? How would the application of your toil and skill change if you were not driven by vices?

The results of the rat race driven by envy are so empty. *This also is vanity and a striving after wind* (v.4b). We spend our lives in the rat race of trying to out-do our competitor. Or we even try to out-do ourselves compared to last year's accomplishments. Even churches are guilty of this rat-race-kind-of-living. At what point do we decide it is not worth the passing, faulty, empty reward? At what point do we learn Solomon's conclusion in Proverbs 14:30? *A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot.*

One reaction to this intense competition might be isolation. But, there is danger here because isolationism is akin to self-destruction. *The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh* (v.5). One adverse reaction to the rat race is to become self-absorbed. An expression of the self-absorption is the person who decides that the best way to escape the rat race is to avoid work. This is self-destructive like self-cannibalism as the words *eats his own flesh* indicate. That kind of isolationism also results in poverty. *A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man* (Proverbs 6:10-11). It also results in physical, emotional, mental declivity.

According to many sociologists, this is a common characteristic of Generation Z (millennials). Many of them honestly wonder why they should work if they don't have to. If the government (i.e. we the tax-paying people) are willing to pay them a guaranteed salary, why go to work? Sure the paltry salary won't pay for a new home; but then, what are Mom and Dad going to do with their home? Someone might as well use it. In fact, it is common for those kids to look for a way to avoid work – like hope that someone builds a robot to work for them.

Removing yourself from the workforce is not the best solution to the rat race. On the other hand, a little quietness is therapeutic. *Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind* (v.6). See the preacher's contrast here. Two hands full of toil and striving pictures the typical American who has stuff in both hands and is working for more stuff. Better is one handful of quietness, tranquility, confidence, and contentment.

The ideal is a practice of removing self from the stress of duties periodically in order to refresh the soul by communing with God the "blessed Controller of all things." Who practiced removal from the rat

race for quiet contemplation better than Jesus? We simply need to follow Bible teaching. Paul taught us by his testimony, *Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content (Philippians 4:11)*. He taught, *Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment (1 Timothy 6:6)*. Therefore, we should agree with the writer to the Hebrew Christians, *Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5)*.

Balance is the key. We should work diligently for God's glory. We should rest in God's care.

### **Greed Robs Us of Relationships (vv.7-12).**

The preacher ran head-on into an important question. Why toil for no one (vv.7-8)? That is the problem for the guy who is seeking satisfaction by denying pleasure. *Again, I saw vanity under the sun: 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?" (vv.7-8a)*.

Notice that this person willingly deprives himself of pleasure in order to toil. This has been considered wise and red-blooded American for generations. But wait! Who is to benefit from all the work and deprivation of pleasure? The toiler has no friends or family who will benefit. Even he will not benefit because he cannot find satisfaction in riches. So he learns to find some fulfillment in the "hunt."

What an unhappy business! *This also is vanity and an unhappy business (v.8b)*. Focusing on pleasure and satisfaction for self is an unhappy business. Laboring for no one but me is futile. "Don't be a selfish, greedy workaholic, or you will find your work worthless and yourself all alone, even at your own funeral. Order your flowers now, because no one else will." (Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Reformed Expository Commentary*, "Ecclesiastes," Philipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2014, 100.) A selfish, stingy workaholic is best pictured by Charles Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge. In the end, you will find yourself all alone and unable to take anything with you when you die.

Isolationism is not profitable. Therefore, we conclude with the preacher that help is better than no help (vv.9-12). The lesson here is that relationships are beneficial. *Two are better than one (v.9a)*. Yes, relationships require work. But it is still better to be with someone than not to be with someone.

Solomon listed a few very practical ramifications of having help. We have often heard that many hands make light work. That is what the preacher meant when he said that two are better than one, *because they have a good reward for their toil (v.9b)*. Also, when you fall down, there is someone to pick you up if there are two of you. *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 (v.10)!*

Another advantage of having a friend is that there will always be someone to provide warmth. *Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? (v.11)*. Yes, this sounds rather creepy to us. Obviously the preacher's culture was different than ours. So are some modern cultures in Europe and the Middle East where men hold hands and even kiss each other. Also, with two people there is someone to provide protection. *And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him – a threefold cord is not quickly broken (v.12)*.

Notice the progression with numbers of people throughout this chapter. When the preacher argued that it was better not to have been born, he proposed that 0 is better than 1 (vv.2-3). Coming to verse six, he decided that it is okay for a person to be alone. That means one person. So, 1 is better than 0 (v.6). In verse nine, he concluded that 2 is better than 1, and now in verse twelve 3 is better than 2 (v.12). Of course the best threefold cord is Jesus, you, and me. Though in all fairness, that is not the context of frustrating life under the sun.

It is fitting for us to make application of this principle to the Church. We members of the Body of Christ need and depend on each other. Paul argued, *For the body does not consist of one member but of many (1 Corinthians 12:14)*. *The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you" (1 Corinthians 12:21)*. The writer to the born-again Hebrews challenged the Church, *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the*

*habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Hebrews 10:24-25).* Isolationism and “church” are contradictory ideas. Nor is the church about “me.” We ARE a relationship.

### **Isolation Even at the Top (vv.13-16).**

The preacher gave us a “from rags to riches” kind of story (vv.13-14). First, there is an old, foolish king contrasted with a young and not so foolish king. *Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice (v.13).* There was a king and maybe, based on his experiments, it was Solomon. As this hypothetical king became old, he refused to take advice. That is not an unusual characteristic about us as we grow older. We might be bold enough to ask, “What can a young whipper-snapper teach us wise and experienced people?” Actually, they can and do teach us a lot! When the king cannot be taught, he needs to step down from being the king.

Contrasted to the stubborn, old king is the poor, wise, young king. *For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor (v.14).* It is the classic American story – from rags to riches. It is a Charles Dickens kind of story. It is a story that sounds a lot like Joseph.

But, glory in the rags to riches idea all you want, a problem still persists. All kings go from well known to isolated (vv.15-16). The young king leads many. *I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king’s place. There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led (vv.15-16a).* It appears the young king took the old king’s throne. His citizens, subjects, and admirers were countless. This changing of the guard happens all the time in sports, business, schools, churches, and, of course, government. What is to become of the new hero, new icon, new leader?

Eventually, however, the young king follows the old king. *Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind (v.16b).* Eventually, the new will become old to be replaced by another “new.” And we are all alike forgotten.

Even Solomon concluded, *There is no remembrance of former things, nor will there be any remembrance of later things yet to be among those who come after (Ecclesiastes 1:11).*

Such is life without God. If we contemplate all the oppression in the world, we are frustrated that we cannot fix it all. If we are driven by greed to compete in the rat race, all we gain is passing and futile, offering us no satisfaction. If we hide away like hermits, we self-cannibalize. Better to thrive in our relationship with God who is the God of all comfort, and in our relationship with others in order to show God’s love to them.