

## **The Empty Chase – Ecclesiastes 4:4-16**

**Main Idea:** As God's creation, we were never meant to be the center of the universe—we were made to reflect the light of Another.

### **I. The Poison of Envy | Ecclesiastes 4:4**

Solomon begins his concluding thoughts in chapter 4 by noting that “all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor” (v. 4). **Here we see the tragic reality that much of human striving is not born from a healthy desire to serve, create, or steward, but from an unhealthy comparison with others.** Envy is more than wanting what someone else has; it is a deep resentment at the success or blessing of others, coupled with the desire to surpass them. The result is an endless cycle of discontentment, for if our joy rests on having “more” than someone else, we will never arrive at satisfaction. There will always be another neighbor to compare ourselves with, another rung on the ladder to climb. Augustine observed this in his *Confessions*: “Envy is the diabolical sin. From envy comes hatred, detraction, calumny, joy at another's misfortune, and grief at another's prosperity.”<sup>1</sup> **Envy does not merely distort our desires; it corrodes our souls.** Scripture consistently warns of its danger. Proverbs tells us that “envy makes the bones rot” (Prov. 14:30), a vivid image of how envy works from the inside out, destroying peace and joy. James describes envy and selfish ambition as “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” (James 3:15), showing that **envy is not a small sin to be tolerated but a hellish impulse to be killed.** Throughout redemptive history, envy has driven some of the darkest sins: Miriam and Aaron's challenge against Moses (Num. 12), Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery (Gen. 37), and even the crucifixion of Christ itself, for Pilate perceived that “it was out of envy that they delivered Him up” (Matt. 27:18).

**Envy always distorts our vision.** Instead of rejoicing in God's gifts to others, we resent them. Instead of seeing our work as service to God, we make it a competition with our neighbor. The parable of the prodigal son illustrates this well. While the younger son wasted his inheritance, the older son was poisoned by envy (Luke 15:11-32). He could not rejoice at his brother's restoration but rather resented the father's grace toward him. John Chrysostom in commenting envy described in Scripture's wisdom literature emphasized: “As a moth gnaws a garment, so doth envy consume a man.”<sup>2</sup> **The danger of envy is not only that it leaves us restless but also that it isolates us from the joy of community and blinds us to the generosity of God.**

#### **To Ponder:**

1. Where do you see envy creeping into your own life — work, family, or even ministry?
2. What could help you cultivate contentment and gratitude instead of comparison?

### **II. The Burden of Loneliness | Ecclesiastes 4:5-12**

**In verses 5-12, Solomon turns from envy to its natural consequence: loneliness.** He presents two vivid pictures. First, the fool folds his hands in idleness (v. 5), destroying himself through laziness. Second, the solitary worker toils endlessly without companionship (v. 8), never asking, “For whom am I toiling?” Both extremes are empty. **To be lazy is not only to waste one's life in neglect, but also to live under the banner of self-sufficiency and self-centeredness (Prov. 6:6-11).** The tragedy of both is the same: a life disconnected from others, lived without the joy of companionship or the blessing of community. By contrast, Solomon exalts the beauty of fellowship: “Two are better than one” (v. 9). Companionship brings reward, mutual help, warmth, and protection (v. 9-12). Ultimately, Solomon concludes that “a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (v. 12), a phrase that has been understood not only to affirm the strength of friendship but also to point toward the reality that true unity is only secured when God Himself is the third strand. **Scripture consistently presents the Christian life as a communal endeavor, never a solo journey.**

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Edward B. Pusey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 210.

<sup>2</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 419.

The New Testament reinforces this truth. Paul exhorts believers to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Jesus summarized the law with two relational commands: to love God fully and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-39). **The Christian life is irreducibly communal. To isolate oneself, whether by pride, self-sufficiency, or bitterness, is to invite spiritual ruin.** Dietrich Bonhoeffer, reflecting on discipleship in *Life Together*, wrote: “The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.”<sup>3</sup> **Loneliness may feel safer for some, but it leaves us vulnerable, impoverished, and spiritually cold.** Only in Christ-led community do our lives produce the music of grace.

#### To Ponder:

1. How has individualism in our culture shaped your own approach to church and discipleship?
2. What steps might you take to weave your life more deeply into the life of your community of believers (Church)?

### III. The Restlessness of Pride | Ecclesiastes 4:13-16

Finally, in verses 13-16 Solomon warns of the futility of pride. He presents a contrast: a poor yet wise youth is better than an old and foolish king who no longer listens to counsel (v. 13). The lesson is sobering. **A man may rise from poverty to the throne, gaining influence and acclaim (v. 14), yet he cannot secure lasting remembrance.** Even the most celebrated leaders are soon forgotten (v. 16). The restless hunger for recognition, power, and honor leads only to disappointment. **Pride promises glory but delivers emptiness.** The Pharisees loved seats of honor and greetings in the marketplace (Matt. 23:6-7), yet Jesus declared that such pride leads to judgment. Pride is never satisfied, always craving more notoriety, more authority, and more applause. **Pride robs us of contentment and blinds us to our dependence on God.**

Scripture gives us examples of God humbling his faithful servants, producing in them genuine humility. Peter, confronted with Christ’s holiness, confessed, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). Later, when Cornelius bowed before him, Peter insisted, “Stand up; I too am a man” (Acts 10:26). Paul’s self-description grew humbler over time: from “least of the apostles” (1 Cor. 15:9), to “least of all the saints” (Eph. 3:8), to “chief of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15). **True greatness in God’s kingdom comes not through self-exaltation but through humility (Matt. 23:11-15).** Thomas Watson said it well in *The Godly Man’s Picture*: “Pride seeks to un-God God.”<sup>4</sup> Only when our pride is crucified in Christ can we find rest. Pride is restless because it places the self at the center of life, demanding that all others orbit around us. **But the human soul was never meant to be the center of the universe — it was made to reflect the light of Another.** When we demand honor for ourselves, we are attempting to fill a role that belongs only to God, and the weight of that glory crushes us. Pride never allows us to rest because there is always another threat to our superiority, another rival to surpass, another insecurity to silence. Only when we bow before the Lord of glory do we discover the peace of being small before the Infinite.

In Ecclesiastes 4:4-16, Solomon leads us through three traps that plague life “under the sun”: envy, loneliness, and pride. **Each one promises gain but leaves us empty.** Yet the antidotes are clear: **contentment instead of envy, godly community instead of loneliness, and humility instead of pride.** In Christ, we have a new identity that frees us from comparison, a new family that rescues us from isolation, and a new Lord who crushes our pride by modeling humility to us. The Empty Chase ends only when we find our satisfaction in Christ, our belonging in His body, and our humility at the foot of His cross.

#### To Ponder

1. In what areas of life does pride most easily take root for you—your accomplishments, your knowledge, or your position?
2. Who could you intentionally honor or encourage this week as a way of resisting the restless appetite of pride?

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<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 19.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Godly Man’s Picture* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 83.