

V. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective
From Vanity to Vitality
“The Depth of Evil and Vanity Under the Sun”
Ecclesiastes 4
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Hopefully the way we have been going through this book of Ecclesiastes that you have found it encouraging. Let’s start by looking at Ecclesiastes 4:1–3 which says [1] *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! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. [2] And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. [3] But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.*

I want to start with a couple of thoughts on this chapter and hopefully we will finish this chapter by the end of the study. One of the blessings of expository preaching is God’s Word brings you to things that you normally wouldn’t jump in and handle. Ecclesiastes 3 was challenging enough but Ecclesiastes 4 is certainly a very challenging one. Hopefully we will make some sense out of it. Some have asked about an outline for this book but the reason I haven’t done that is I agree with one commentator who says this book is not ‘outlinable.’ This does not mean the book of Ecclesiastes is pointless. On the contrary it is full of pointed information, but it doesn’t follow what is normally seen in narratives (historical books) or didactic books that are designed to teach us doctrine and application. The connecting tissues just aren’t there.

I like the way one commentator says it. He says the preacher is basically functioning like a pundit, an observer, of life under the sun, bearing the curse of sin under the sun, without acknowledging the solution that comes from beyond the sun, from the heavens and that is the solution of God’s grace. But periodically the preacher can’t help himself because everything is valid for him to take a look at. It’s a little bit like my 10 minute daily radio program where here is an event and a comment on it. Now the difference is that I’m trying to make a comment from a Christian world and life view. The writer of Ecclesiastes is not trying to give the answer from a God-centered world and life view. He is giving you the insights that he is observing in life as he walks through life. One commentator said he is literally ransacking all of life and just pulling stuff out.

Periodically there are some linear connecting tissues and thankfully I have found one for you in Ecclesiastes 4 which we’ll get to shortly. Normally though he just seems to be moving from here to there to here to there and periodically he breaks in with a God-centered perspective which we will see one in chapter 4. Most of the time we see him going through life here and there and saying this is vanity under the sun, it’s empty, confusing and meaningless. If his verdict is everything under the sun is meaningless, unless you know and see the God of glory as you fear Him who brings meaning and purpose to all of this, then how can you outline it? If it’s meaningless and incoherent because sin does not make sense then how do you outline this?

One of the great challenges for me in life is counseling. I think I’m pretty good at it once or twice but after that you want to go to someone more trained in counseling. One of the things that has been helpful to me in counseling is I have an answer for everyone who comes to me for counseling when they ask me one question. I have to confess that my favorite counseling video

is Bob Newhart's video titled 'Stop it!' In the video this woman comes into his office with a problem and he basically tells her he charges \$5 for the first five minutes and it's free after that but that he doesn't give change. She proceeds to tell him her problem and he basically says I have two words that will help you and that is 'stop it.' She says 'that's it' and he says 'yes just stop it.' That is why his sessions never lasted more than 5 minutes but that was his insight in life.

I don't necessarily recommend that for counseling but I have finally found something I can share with people from a biblical perspective that is just as clear as I can make and that is when I'm asked about someone's sin that has brought pain and difficulty into their life which pains me because I want so badly to fix it for them but I can't but I can answer when they ask me 'why did they do that' that sin doesn't make sense. I can give them contributing excuses for why they did whatever it was but I can't understand why they did it because sin is never sensible. Sin is never rational and is always incoherent.

The first sin recorded in the Bible is that they ate the apple (we don't know for sure what fruit they ate but you'll see why I used apple shortly). Why? It was because they were told God was a liar and knows if you eat it you will be like Him. So they ate the fruit because they wanted to be like God. How stupid is that? You already are like God because you were made in His image but what you are really wanting is to take His place. That's why nothing under the sun makes sense, even our solutions to the insensibility of sin under the sun. Man-made religions and solutions don't make any more sense than the sin because all of them are an attempt to take God's place and solve the sin problem by our own strength and wisdom by what we do or give.

I think Ecclesiastes is Solomon's repentance to get back to where he was in the book of Proverbs that is signified by what he writes later in the Song of Solomon as he gets to God's solution in Ecclesiastes 12 which is to fear God. Don't live life under the sun. Live life in awe, respect and trust in the One who made the sun and is above the sun. We looked at the four man-made solutions Solomon brings out in Ecclesiastes 1 and 2 and they are as insensible, irrational and pointless as everything that is done under the sun.

As we get into Ecclesiastes 4 he will look into the comfortless we have because of sin in this world. He will look at the insanity of covetousness in the motivations of work in the world. He will look at the isolation we have and its emptiness. He'll show how we are isolated in our self-absorption in life. Then by the Spirit of God he will give us a little bit of a glimpse of what the answer is by the One who made the sun and the One who brings the grace that is greater than the sin that is making everything meaningless and full of vanity. I will try to give you an outline of Ecclesiastes 4 which may be helpful.

There is a literary dynamic in this chapter for this chapter is a series of continued visions that started back in chapters 1 and 2. He starts Ecclesiastes 4 with 'Again I saw...' and then in verse 4 he says 'Then I saw...' So the first section of what he sees is in Ecclesiastes 4:1-3. Then there is another analysis he makes in Ecclesiastes 4:4-6. The next one is in Ecclesiastes 4:7-13 and then he'll give a final observation that I believe opens a door that the Spirit of God gives to the preacher, likely that he is not even aware of, as he writes it before us. So let's take this section by section.

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 says *[1] 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! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. [2] And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. [3] But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.*

What does sin bring? It brings oppression. We see it in families, nations, businesses, relationships, and government. He sees the oppressed as hopeless and helpless. He sees them in pain with seemingly no solution, powerless, and there is no comfort for the oppressed. Yet on the side of the oppressors there was power, with pain but no one to comfort them either. They are also empty. They have no comfort in their power over others. Like every sin in the world where we attempt to penetrate the place of God there is a momentary exhilaration perhaps but there is nothing of comfort. The oppressed have no comfort because of their isolation under the oppressor.

In verse 2 he is not talking about those who are dead in Christ are more fortunate. Looking at this situation there is the oppressed and the oppressor. This doesn't mean we look at this and don't have any concerns about justice it just means that under the sun without the power of the Gospel that transforms life so that our hope is built on Christ our only solid foundation, then the oppressed are hopeless and the oppressors are hopeless. Therefore the only people you can save have been delivered from this oppression are the people that have died. We know from other passages of Scripture that is not the whole truth.

Those who have sinned against God by being oppressors or those in their oppression who have not fled to God as their only hope then death has brought no relief. Now from the writer's perspective as he walks through life says that must have relief and as a pastor I deal with this all the time. People with the perspective under the sun without the perspective of eternity will make comments like 'he was suffering so much, I'm so glad he is finally dead and relieved of his suffering' yet the person did not know the Lord. The suffering they now face is so beyond that which they have suffered in a broken world that there is no relief.

Upon death there is only two destinations – either the joy of eternity with the Lord who has taken the suffering that was due to us for our sin or the judgment of a holy God upon those who have wanted to live as if they are God, wanted the place of God in life and have fallen short of the glory of God, then the wages of that sin is before them. This is the kind of perspective the writer of Ecclesiastes is bringing.

I remember a comment made by C.S. Lewis' brother when they had gone to a funeral. There was an atheist who C.S. Lewis would debate from time to time to win him to the Lord and he had died. This was the funeral him and his brother were attending. After everyone had left the two of them went to the grave. The grave was covered with flowers and Lewis' brother looked at him and said 'Well, an atheist, he looked so wonderful laid out in the coffin but he was all dressed up with nowhere to go.' Lewis then said 'Oh how he wishes that were true.'

So after the writer says he thinks the best thing is for them to be dead he then says perhaps it is best to have never lived at all. Ecclesiastes 4:3 is a total commitment to nihilism. Oh the joys of why God made us. He made us for His glory and to enjoy Him forever but because of sin this writer comes to a verdict that it is better to have not been born at all. The reality is that it is better to know the Lord, be forgiven of your sins and be restored to the reason why you're made at all and that is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Let's now look at the next section in Ecclesiastes 4:4–6 which says [4] *Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. [5] The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. [6] Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.*

Here he is looking at all these people working and sees the dominating motivation of work that he now calls striving after the wind. I'm glad he hasn't said work is vanity because it's not and work is also not a part of the curse. Work is a part of creation. God made us to work. I

have noticed that many here in this church that have retired from a job about a week after the schedule they are keeping is now more than what they used to clock in for. That is because you really don't retire you just retread and invent more work to do but for some reason you decided you wanted to work without pay from now on. If you don't work you will truly shrivel up because that's what God made us to do. Work doesn't come in Genesis 3 after the sin but what comes in Genesis 3 is the *toil* of work, the weeds, thorns and thistles of work. Work comes in Genesis 1 and 2 where God made us to subdue the earth and rule over the creation. That's why we actually love to work.

The Christian isn't at the place where they can have joy in their work if I have this particular job, but the Christian says that whatever my job is I'm going to make it work for the Lord. That is where my joy comes from. Now it is wonderful if it matches up with your deep seeded desires, skills and abilities but when you started out your work was what your parents told you, you were going to do and then you became the parent and had the opportunity to tell your kids what to do while you did what they were going to do and take your work afterward. This notion of fulfillment in employment is something that we've come up with. We have our fulfillment in working heartily as unto the Lord (Colossians 3:23).

I'm not trying to be a kill joy. Thank the Lord you live in a society where you can move around and you have not been assigned work. The fact is that work is a gift from the Lord and that is not what the writer here is talking about. He is talking about a specific thing for most of the people he observed working, they weren't working to do their work for the One over the sun but they were doing their work under the sun and that means they were working to beat the other person. Their motivation in work was covetousness. They wanted what the other person had and their wanting to compete with them to beat them.

Do you know what the problem is? Whenever you go to work, in order to outshine someone else or out do them, as you do that out of envy and jealousy then what happens next is you meet the next person that has more than you and you try to then compete with them. There is always someone beyond you that has more salary than you or more influence or more power than you. Thus it's nothing more than vanity and the cycle of emptiness continues.

Then someone will say if envy and jealousy are the motivations for work then I won't work and according to Proverbs 6:10–11 it says *[10] A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, [11] and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man.* The writer of Ecclesiastes says in 4:5 it also results in cannibalism. You cannibalize yourself where you lose heart, hope, effectiveness, self-respect and everything when laziness becomes the solution to covetousness in the arena of work.

Periodically in Ecclesiastes the writer can't help himself and he just has to break through with a God-centered answer like he does with Ecclesiastes 4:6. The God-centered answer is to forget covetousness and know contentment in the Lord. Then you work as unto the Lord but you're not working out of covetousness that brings nothing but vanity or you have not quit working because of your frustration that cannibalizes you, your family and others, and your contentment is bringing glory to the Lord for your contentment is not in your work but in the Lord. That then frees you to do work, otherwise work becomes striving after the wind.

Now we come to a third section in Ecclesiastes 4:7–8 which says *[7] 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.*

This reminds me of a song that came out of my generation by the Beatles titled All the Lonely People and the lyrics go like this;

*I look at all the lonely people
I look at all the lonely people*

*Picks up the rice in the church where her wedding has been
Lives in a dream waits at the window
Wearing a face that she keeps in a jar by the door, who is it for?
All the lonely people, where do they all come from?
All the lonely people, where do they all belong?*

*Writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear
No one comes near look at him working
Nodding his socks in the night when there's nobody there
What does he care?
All the lonely people, where do they all come from?
All the lonely people, where do they all belong?*

*I look at all the lonely people
I look at all the lonely people*

*Died in the church and was buried alone with her name, nobody came
Wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from her grave
No one was saved
All the lonely people, where do they all come from?
All the lonely people, where do they all belong?*

You have walked over people in your labor as you have attempted to control everything and oppress people. You didn't have time for your son or daughter because of your work. 'I was working for you.' If you were working for me where was the work with me as a son, as a daughter? The most meaningful times for me growing up were the times my dad took the time to take me into his life. Fathers, teach your children that when you rise up, you walk by the wayside. I loved it when my dad would play catch with me in the backyard but I loved it even more when my dad took me to the golf course with him or on a work trip with him.

Yet here in this third section this person who is toiling has no time for friends, colleagues or companions and doesn't even have time for his children. This also reminds me of another song by Harry Chapin titled "Cat's in the Cradle." Go google the lyrics. It's a sad song about a dad who didn't have time for his kid and this is the lyrics to the last verse;

*I've long since retired, my son's moved away
I called him up just the other day
I said, "I'd like to see you if you don't mind"
He said, "I'd love to, Dad, if I can find the time
You see my new job's a hassle and the kids have the flu
But it's sure nice talking to you, Dad
It's been sure nice talking to you"
And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me*

*He'd grown up just like me
My boy was just like me*

When he wanted to go spend time with his own son, his son had become just like him, the one that never had time for him before. The toil for work had ruined all his relationships. He is never satisfied with what he has so he is always pressing on to the next achievement, sale or whatever. Because of that he'll deprive himself of pleasure. He is actually isolating himself in his self-absorption and self-promotion. The writer says that is vanity and I love his phrase, 'that's unhappy business.'

Then the writer can't help himself again for here's another breakthrough that actually changed the way I do ministry. It's in Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 which says [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.*

Here when two work together they work more successfully. I saw this in my own family. One day my grandfather was going to help my mom and dad by helping them paint their house. My grandfather had brought someone with him and because we didn't have much money my dad said 'Why did you bring him?' He said 'It's going to be cheaper because we'll be able to do it faster by the two of us working together. Don't worry it will actually save you money and we'll do a better job.' My grandfather was the kind of guy who would measure twice and cut once. I remember watching them and my grandfather was on the roof and his friend Jim at the bottom and my grandfather would yell what he needed and boom it was thrown up to him where he never had to come down the ladder. That's synergy. We call that team work. Two are better than one and the progress is much more effective. Also something unspoken here is you get the strength of one that covers the weaknesses of the other and vice versa.

In a broken world, broken moments are going to happen and he is telling us not to be by ourselves. Cultivate those relationships. I also can relate to two keeping warm better than one when I was young for one of my little sisters who is now with the Lord used to come up to my attic room and ask if she could get into my bed because it was 'so much' warmer where I was. Yet that was not necessarily the case in my attic room. In the winter I was kind of glad she wanted to do that because it was cold up in that attic room.

Now some things even overcome the things for warmth. I told my parents when I left for college that I would sleep by myself until I got married and now that I'm married I don't get in a bed with anyone unless it's my wife. We know what the writer is talking about here that together you can generate that heat. Things are so much more comfortable than if you are just sleeping alone.

As I talk about Ecclesiastes 4:12 I'm taking liberty. Wherever I can bring Jesus to your heart then I'm going to do it. I don't believe the writer wrote this for the reason I'm about to give but I do believe the Holy Spirit would accommodate what I'm about to say. He begins to talk about a fight and say cannot two overcome an adversary better than one and that's just common sense – certainly it can. So we have this notion of team and we have tried to use that in ministry here at Briarwood. Hopefully if you go up to any person on the pastoral staff here at Briarwood and ask them whose team they are on they will be able to tell you, because we really believe you need teams for ministry – teams of leaders in ministry. It is more effective, synergy. It is more encouraging even when the coldness of the challenges of life are there. We warm one

another to the task. When adversity comes we are there to encourage each other to overcome the adversary.

If two can do that, then praise God if there's a third. I think the third is Jesus. I think that is the One that makes the two one in marriage and that makes the team function better, when the Lord is the Captain of that team. I'm not saying that is the third one the writer is referring to but I thank the Lord he put three in there because that give me the chance to tell you that Jesus ought to be the third one on the team. He ought to be right there leading that team whatever that team may be – the team of a marriage, a family, work, etc. So we see this breaking in at this moment that the writer has.

Let's look at this last final observation in Ecclesiastes 4:13–16 which says *[13] Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. [14] For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. [15] I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. [16] There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.*

Praise God for the elderly for they are so wise but praise God for the elderly who don't think they know it all but they keep learning. I love my founding pastor who is always reading. I love how these older people in this church are always learning. The most effective people are not the people who think they know it all but the people who want to know it all. This king in verse 13 decides he can't take advice from anyone and that's the problem that happens when you get to the top for you start thinking you do know it all and that you don't need to know anything else.

This king had been a learner but no more and now he becomes the oppressor. He becomes the liability, but here is a youth who was like him at one time who now wants to know it all. The youth is poor and is not like this king who is rich and has all this power. Now this youth is making his way and will one day take the place of that king. That's the answer isn't it? No, because once he gets there he will become like the one he replaced. It's another statement of vanity. The answer is not in the next person under the sun.

The answer is in the One who came under the sun for us – Christ. This is what I think the writer just opened up in this Ecclesiastes 4 text. There is a King who is glorious, who came into poverty, who humbled Himself laying aside all of the riches of His throne to come and be humbled, found in appearance as Man who never owned anything that we know of. He never traveled beyond His own nation as a Man, except once that we know of. He never was acclaimed by anyone and yet this King of Kings came as an infant. In His childhood He grew in wisdom and stature, favor with God and with man (Luke 2:52). He didn't isolate but went to the temple every week to learn from the teachers and He was *submissive to His parents* (Luke 2:51). This Jesus is the One whom God sent for us, from beyond the Son, the One who made the sun so that we can have eternal life in Him.

He is the answer to the comfortless, the covetousness, and the isolated without companionship. He is the Friend who will stick closer than a brother. He is the Savior who laid everything aside not to have more but to have you and to save you. We think it's what we do and what we give that is the answer to vanity under the sun. We think taking God's place is the answer to vanity under the sun. That is what all of our religions and –isms tend to do but the reality is it's not what we do and give but what God has done and given. It's not us getting to God's place but it's God coming to take our place that we can have everlasting life. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for the great privilege we have to worship, pray, hear the preaching of the Word and singing and reading the Word. Would You Holy Spirit speak that Word into our lives that we would joyfully embrace God's solution to the vanity of sin and striving after the wind? Father, when we take Your solution, it is Your Son. I pray for my brothers and sisters that their work would not be the competition of covetousness but they would work heartily unto the Lord and that they would know that they have a Friend who sticks closer than a brother, One who will be with them all the days until the end. Therefore they are free not simply to have friends but they're free to be a friend and no longer is there the isolation of self-absorption. The first place that would be felt is to a brother or sister or a son or daughter or a husband to a wife and a wife to a husband – walking together with Christ. Father, may we know the joy of not thinking we are something because we oppress nor giving up hope because we are oppressed nor thinking it's better that we never live, but that we might know the life of Christ and that we're more than a conqueror through Him who loves us. I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

The Overview

- I. Again I saw (v. 1–3)
- II. Then I saw (v. 4–6)
- III. Again I saw (v. 7–12)

A Final Observation (v. 13–16)