

Ecclesiastes 4

Verses 1- 3

Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold, I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and power was on the side of their oppressors, but they had no one to comfort them.² So I congratulated the dead who are already dead, more than the living who are still living.³ But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.

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This is an apt description of this fallen world and unbelievers use this fact to argue that there is no God because why would a loving God allow such an environment to exist. In saying this they forget, or pretend to forget, that mankind has been given free will and if God intervened to stop men from doing wrong on a regular basis then He would be nullifying their free will.

Solomon contributed to the problem of oppression by using hundreds of thousands as slaves to help build the temple. Christ, on the other hand, showed compassion on the multitudes in the following ways

1. He fed them when they were hungry.
2. He healed their diseases
3. He was kind to the tax gatherers and sinners that others shunned.
4. He bore the punishment that all of mankind deserved.

² So I congratulated the dead who are already dead, more than the living who are still living. ³ But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.

Solomon is being a somewhat hyperbolic here but his point is taken.

Verses 4 - 6

⁴ I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is *the result of rivalry between a person and his neighbor*. This too is futility and striving after wind.

⁵ The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. ⁶ One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.

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People used to use the expression “keeping up with the Joneses” but it seems that that expression has fallen out of vogue and now people call it “the American dream”. We want what our neighbor has plus a bit more.

See James 4:1 – 3

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is the source not your pleasures that wage war in your body's parts? ² You lust and do not have, so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, so that you may spend *what you request* on your pleasures.

⁵ The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. ⁶ One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.

The fool avoids work and it leaves him poor and wanting while the person who works to much never takes time to enjoy life. Solomon believed that moderation was the best way to approach work.

Verses 7 - 8

⁷ Then I looked again at futility under the sun. ⁸ There was a man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches, and he never asked, “And for whom do I labor and deprive myself of pleasure?” This too is futility, and it is an unhappy task.

There were two issues that this man had overlooked.

1. He never heard the proverb, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy".
2. He didn't have a close relative so, why is he a workaholic?

There was a law that spoke to who would inherit his land when he died but why would someone engross themselves in endless work only to pass it on to a distant relative.

See Numbers 27:8 – 11

⁸ Further, you shall speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'If a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter. ⁹ And if he has no daughter, then you shall give his inheritance to his brothers. ¹⁰ If he has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his father's brothers. ¹¹ And if his father has no brothers, then you shall give his inheritance to his nearest relative in his own family, and he shall take possession of it; and it shall be a statutory ordinance to the sons of Israel, just as the LORD has commanded Moses.'"

Verses 9 - 12

⁹ Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor; ¹⁰ for if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up! ¹¹ Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm *alone*? ¹² And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three *strands* is not quickly torn apart.

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This illustration was probably drawn from travelling businessmen but it can be applied to any two people in a business relationship.

¹¹ Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm *alone*?

The reference here is not to a husband and wife, but to the travelling businessmen mentioned in the previous verses. Nights in Palestine are cold and a lone traveler would have a hard time keeping warm.

¹² And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.

This stresses the value of companionship among travelers to ensure their safety. This may be one of the reasons why Christ sent out his apostles in pairs. When it comes to safety, 3 is better than 2.

Verses 13 – 17

¹³ A poor yet wise youth is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction— ¹⁴ for he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. ¹⁵ I have seen all those living under the sun move to the side of the second youth who replaces him. ¹⁶ There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them. Even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him; for this too is futility and striving after wind.

This depicts a common truth about public leaders; their popularity is short-lived because the public is often fickle. There are two leaders presented here.

1. The old man who had been king too long.
2. A poor youth who through wisdom rose to be king but the next generation hated the wise youth who succeeded the old king.