

Ecclesiastes

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 points at some things which can keep us from joy:

- Oppression (4:1-3)
- Envy (4:4-6)
- Loneliness (4:7-12)
- Fleeting nature of power (4:13-16)

The chapter division here can obscure that content in chapters 3 & 4 are connected.

Recall that the teacher believed God would eventually balance the scales of justice (3:17), and that he uses injustice for His purposes.

Read Ecc 4:1-3 [Slide 2] (p555)

¹Again 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.

Oppression (vv1-3)

This section starts with an interesting word, “again”. As he returns to this meditation, he notices not only the oppression, but its effects.

Teacher makes some observations about harshness of life, specifically oppression in v1-3. In the ancient world, there was no middle class. A few rich, and a lot of extremely poor people, working long hours with little return. Poor had very little legal protection to prevent them from being taken advantage of. Major theme of OT prophets is God’s displeasure with the wealthy for taking advantage of the poor. Teacher doesn’t see much hope.

Verse 2 has some strong language! In the face of oppression, the teacher says those who are already dead are more fortunate. And more fortunate still is the one who has not yet been born to see the oppression.

The poor are powerless to do anything about their condition.

The feeling of despair is similar to what we see in Job, or in Jeremiah at the end of chapter 20.

Discuss: Is injustice and oppression still something that happens today?

What should our response be when we witness these things?

Apart from influence of God, people will often choose to victimize one another. As Christians, we should be very deliberate about confronting evil and oppression that goes on “under the sun”.

[Slide 3] We've had some direction on this in the past: Ecc 2:26 26 For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind. AND 3:22 So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot. Who can bring him to see what will be after him?

[Slide 4] *By thoroughly disgusting us with the world, and by making us realize its absolute vanity, **God** means to draw us to himself. Only in this way can **Yahweh**, the true and absolute Being, become to us what he really is. Through much tribulation must our hold on earthly things be loosened and ourselves enter into the kingdom of God. (Ernst Hengstenberg, 1860)*

The teacher does not use YHWH in Ecclesiastes. With a subject of common application to *all mankind*, the use of God's name YHWH in his special covenant role with Israel, is inappropriate.

This illustration is especially beautiful because while Ecclesiastes stresses the “Elohim” – the God , it helps demonstrate our need for a Lord, “Yahweh” (and later Christ).

But Elohim and Yahweh are intrinsically one; the Shema affirms that:

[Slide 5] Dt 6:4-6 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (p151)

Envy (vv4-6)

[Slide 6] Of the 9 occurrences of “striving after wind” in Ecclesiastes, 3 are in this chapter.

Read Ecc 4:4-6 [Slide 7]

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.

Envy (vv4-6)

How often is our hard work and achievement based on the fact that we envy what other people have and want to outdo them?

Do we work hard because we care about our jobs or so we can have a better title or buy a nicer car than our neighbors?

Concept of: Keeping up with the Joneses; The grass is always greener on the other side.

If oppression damages relationships (1–3), so more subtly does envy (4–6). Much effort is motivated by the desire to outclass others.

Contrast this with the life of Joseph.

**Recall Teen class discussion of snacks.

What does 4:5 mean?? (v5 is opposite of v4 – laziness)

[Slide 8] A similar concept is found in Pr. 6:10-11, 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. (p531)

[Slide 9] Also a similar concept in Isaiah 9:20: They slice meat on the right, but are still hungry, and they devour on the left, but are not satisfied; each devours the flesh of his own arm, (p574)

Legend/Parable: The Blood knife. *I originally heard this from our preacher Harry Gipson in Del Rio around 1991.* The one thing a wolf is attracted to more than anything else is blood. Once a wolf smells blood, it becomes bloodthirsty. Their appetite for blood is insatiable. By using their weakness against them, Alaskan hunters came up with a simple trap and hunted the wolves.

The Alaskan hunters would dip the end of a knife in blood and then freeze it. They would then add a second and third layer, creating, for lack of a better word, a blood popsicle. They would then take the blood knife and bind it to something solid.

Smelling the scent of blood from many miles away, the wolf would come to the knife with a strong sense of hunger. Initially, there is much joy and delight. The wolf becomes consumed with the blade, licking it repeatedly until it eventually slices their tongue to shreds. Unable to distinguish their blood from the blood on the blade, they will continue to lick the blade, thinking they were enjoying an incredible meal. As blood spatters on the surrounding snow, the wolf has no idea they are lacerating their own mouth, causing a slow bleeding death. The same can be said for those being seduced by worldly pleasures and those with a “crafty heart.” (current source: tribune.org/the-blood-knife)

Review Slide for Verse 6: [Slide 10]

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.

Contentment (6) is better than rivalry (4) or laziness (5). A middle of the road attitude between the two extremes.

Neither hard work nor idleness brings happiness, meaning or fulfillment.

[Slide 11] We'll give Paul the last word here, Phil 4:11-13. ¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (p982)

Read Ecc 4:7-12 [Slides 12-13]

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.

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.

Loneliness (vv7-12)

As we look at v 7-12 we see the meaninglessness of being alone, and the importance of companionship. It's good to have people in your life whom you care about and with whom you can share the fruits of your labors.

Some people engage in endless toil yet are never satisfied even though they acquire great riches.

Ecc 2 we talked about workaholic; but we hopefully work hard to provide for people we care about.

[Slides 14-15] There is a Swedish proverb: "Shared joy is a double joy, shared sorrow is half a sorrow."

When we are going through difficulty, being around our friends can help bring us comfort.

Pits (10), cold nights (11) and bandits (12a) faced the ancient traveler, suggesting the need of companionship in times of accident (10), inadequacy (11) and adversity (12a).

The increase of number from two (9, 12a) to three is significant: the more friends the better.

A threefold cord stands for the great value of being part of a larger group rather than being alone.

Read Ecc 4:13-16 [Slide 16]

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.

Fleeting Nature of Power (vv13-16)

Negative words regarding the king. (remember authorship question)

The tone in this section sounds like hindsight.

Being a king isn't so great if you are a foolish king.

Also you can be poor and wise.

No matter what he does, his reign is "hebel" – fleeting. Those after him will forget about him. In the teen class we compared this to the US presidents. Even if we could name them, do we know the significant contributions of each?

13-14 Don't ever get too self-important to learn. We all know people who've reached the top and yet are fools.

Who is absent from this passage? God. Without God, position and prestige are meaningless.

[Slide 17] Hidden in the tapestry of this chapter, and discussed in our teen class:

- Combine our abilities and work together.
- Be a companion.
- Be a voice in your school or workplace.
- Show your character.
- Exercise wisdom. Recall the seasons and know where you are. (time to speak, time to be silent, etc.)