



Ecclesiastes - Chapter Four

IV Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:16 - Second Catalogue of Vanities (continues/concludes)

IV.a Ecclesiastes 3:16-4:8 - Judgement and the Future Belong to God (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Four

Solomon believed that going to the extremes of being lazy or a workaholic is foolish and irresponsible. The answer is to work hard but with moderation. He believed that a person should take time to enjoy God's other gifts and realise that he gives everyone their assignments and rewards; they do not come from human sources. Solomon believed that a person should seek God's approval above all and not recognition from man, which is in accord with the teachings of Jesus the Messiah: <<How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God?>> (John 5:44).

¹ Again I saw all the oppressions that are practised under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed – with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power – with no one to comfort them.

Ecclesiastes 4:1

Again I saw all the oppressions that are practised under the sun. After a brief flirtation with hope, the Teacher once again turned to despair at the end of Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 when he considered the problem of injustice. Continuing with that idea, he then saw all the oppressions that are practised under the sun.

Compassion for the oppressed is common in the OT:

- **Oppression of the people by a king:** *<<A ruler who lacks understanding is a cruel oppressor; but one who hates unjust gain will enjoy a long life>> (Proverbs 28:16).*
- **Oppression of a servant by his master:** *<<You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy labourers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns>> (Deuteronomy 24:14).*
- **Oppression of the poor by the affluent:** *<<Oppressing the poor in order to enrich oneself, and giving to the rich, will lead only to loss>> (Proverbs 22:16), and: <<Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts>> (James 5:4).*
- **Oppression of the poor by the bureaucratic:** *<<If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, 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).*
- **Oppression of the poor by other poor people:** *<<After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, 'You are all taking interest from your own people.' And I called a great assembly to deal with them, and said to them, 'As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!' They were silent, and could not find a word to say>> (Nehemiah 5:7-8), and: <<Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free. And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality>> (Ephesians 6:7-9).*
- **Oppression of the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow:** *<<For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors for ever and ever>> (Jeremiah 7:5-7), <<Father and mother are treated with contempt in you; the alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and the widow are wronged in you>> (Ezekiel 22:7), and: <<Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another>> (Zechariah 7:9-10).*

- **Oppression by charging high interest:** <<In you, they take bribes to shed blood; you take both advance interest and accrued interest, and make gain of your neighbours by extortion; and you have forgotten me, says the Lord God>> (Ezekiel 22:12), and: <<The people of the land have practised extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress>> (Ezekiel 22:29).
- **Oppression by using false weights and measures:** <<A trader, in whose hands are false balances, he loves to oppress>> (Hosea 12:7), and: <<Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practise deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat'>> (Amos 8:4-6).

Look, the tears of the oppressed – with no one to comfort them! Solomon thought of the painful and tear-filled lives of the oppressed. In an 'under the sun' world - where this life is all there is, men and women give no account for their lives in a world to come - the tears of the oppressed are especially bitter and they have no comforter.

On the side of their oppressors there was power – with no one to comfort them. Interestingly, Solomon also knew that the life of those who had power, wealth and influence were also suffering spiritually because they had nothing beyond the deception of their own materialistic position. Even if this may seem to be a life of comfort, there was no comforter to make their lives truly meaningful!

² And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; ³ but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 4:2-3

And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive. Some people's circumstances are so tragic that they even welcome death. The Teacher, however, considers those who have not yet lived or died to be even more fortunate than those who die in such misery, thus indicating that he would still consider death to be an enemy: <<**The last enemy to be destroyed is death**>> (1 Corinthians 15:26), despite its ability to provide relief from earthly suffering.

The thought of both oppressors and their victims finding no justice in eternity was so bitter to the Teacher that he thought the dead fortunate. In an 'under

the sun' world, the dead do not have to think about such painful things. Solomon could only praise the dead this way because at his time he had no certain knowledge of the world yet to come and he wrote most of Ecclesiastes with an 'under the sun' premise. If he had known and accepted what happened to the unrighteous dead, he would probably never have said such a thing.

The dead, who have already died is an interesting phrase. It implies that there are the dead who are not yet dead - the spiritually dead, the living dead, so to speak. They walk this earth and have biological life, but their spirit and soul seem lifeless.

But better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. Solomon took the idea of praising the dead even further, to where he praised those who have never existed. Even the dead were once alive and had to see the evil work that is done 'under the sun'. Derek Kidner commented, "There is nothing sadder in the whole book than the wistful glance in verses 2 and 3 at the dead and the unborn, who are spared the sight of so much anguish."

Job was one who, in his anguish and suffering, believed it would have been better had he not existed: <<*After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. Job said: 'Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, "A man-child is conceived"'*>> (Job 3:1-3). Jesus himself said there was one man for whom it would have been better if he had never been born: Judas; refer to Matthew 26:24. The Teacher's great despair over the injustice of oppression in an 'under the sun' premise shows the moral necessity of an afterlife and a coming judgement. Jesus taught that it is those who oppress and misuse their power who will ultimately endure punishment, not their victims: <<*If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling-blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling-block comes!*>> (Matthew 18:6-7).

⁴ Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from one person's envy of another. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes 4:4

The Teacher observes that much of what is achieved by skilful human labour stems from one person's envy of another. The term translated envy, Hebrew *qin'ah*, can have either negative or positive moral connotations, depending on the context (much like English 'jealousy' and 'zeal'). Here the Teacher focuses on the vanity that comes to those who make such striving, a chasing after wind, their ultimate

good rather than a desire to serve the Lord: <<Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD>> (Joshua 24:15), and: <<Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ>> (Colossians 3:23-24).

Adam Clarke commented, “For if a man act uprightly and properly in the world, he soon becomes the object of his neighbour’s envy and calumny too. Therefore the encouragement to do good, to act an upright part, is very little. This constitutes a part of the vain and empty system of human life.”

- ⁵ Fools fold their hands
and consume their own flesh.
- ⁶ Better is a handful with quiet
than two handfuls with toil,
and a chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes 4:5-6

Fools fold their hands and consume their own flesh. If a person folds their hands – i.e. refuses to work – they only ruin themselves. Solomon here answered the tendency for those jealous of the success of others to be lazy. Like fools, they fold their hands and do nothing - and so waste away. Yet it was not the success of their neighbour that made them waste away; the foolish, lazy person consumes their own flesh. This phrase is used in a different context in: <<*When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh – my adversaries and foes – they shall stumble and fall*>> (Psalm 27:2). The picture there is probably of evildoers as wild animals who would devour the faithful, as confirmed by: <<*Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon the LORD?*>> (Psalm 14:4), <<*And I said: Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice? – you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron*>> (Micah 3:1-3). The analogy can then be used to see that such people are only attacking themselves.

Finally, the Teacher adds a word of caution against excessive striving: instead of two handfuls with toil and a chasing after wind, i.e. something fleeting (v.8), one should learn to be content with less. The Teacher reflects on the value of

contentment. It is better to have less and be content than to have more and constantly be grasping for further success. Solomon weaved some fascinating themes together:

- Hard work and success are good and not to be envied: <<*For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another*>> (Titus 3:3), <<*But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind*>> (James 3:14-16).
- Laziness is wrong and destructive: <<*For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat*>> (2 Thessalonians 3:7-10).
- Yet even the one with full hands must learn contentment: <<*Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these*>> (1 Timothy 6:6-8).

⁷ Again, I saw vanity under the sun: ⁸ the case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil, and their eyes are never satisfied with riches. 'For whom am I toiling', they ask, 'and depriving myself of pleasure?' This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

Ecclesiastes 4:7-8

The case of solitary individuals, without sons or brothers; yet there is no end to all their toil. Solomon thought of a person alone, without family or close friends. The person in Solomon's thinking works hard and wants to gain more and more.

The Teacher makes a sharp contrast in these verses. On the one hand there are people, the case of solitary individuals, who continue in endless toil, yet who are never satisfied even though they acquire great riches for themselves. This, the Teacher says, is vanity and an unhappy business. On the other hand the Teacher affirms how much better two are than one (v.9). Thus the wise person will work

side by side with another, enjoying a good reward and finding companionship and help in times of need.

The Teacher was entirely correct from an ‘under the sun’ perspective. Under that premise, there is no such thing as an eternal accomplishment and one does not even have the potential satisfaction of passing one’s accomplishments on to another. Kidner observed, “This picture of lonely, pointless busyness, equally with that of jealous rivalry in verse 4, checks any excessive claims we might wish to make for the blessings of hard work.”

IV.b Ecclesiastes 4:9-16 - The Value of a Friend

Solomon reflects on the fact that humankind was created to be in relationship and not to live in isolation from one another. Fellowship and teamwork are in view as is the need to take wise counsel and encouragement from one another: *<<And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching>>* (Hebrews 10:24-25).

⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. ¹¹ Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? ¹² And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. In the previous section Solomon thought how even in an ‘under the sun’ world, living alone made life worse. He continues to develop the same idea, noting that two are better than one and will begin to state the reasons why this is true. The wise person will pursue cooperative ventures rather than give in to jealous striving to be first, a striving that isolates him from others. Kidner noted, “Having looked at the poverty of the ‘loner’, whatever his outward success, we now reflect on something better; and better will be a key word here.”

Because they have a good reward for their toil. In a good partnership, two can accomplish more than each one individually. The sum will be greater than the parts.

For if they fall, one will lift up the other. When two work and live together they can help each other in difficult times - but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. The Teacher understood that everybody needs help, and it is a blessing both to give and to receive help.

Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone?

When two work and live together they can bring comfort to the lives of each other.

And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one.

When two work and live together, they can bring security and safety to each other. To use a familiar phrase, they can ‘watch the back’ of one another.

These four verses show the great value of human relationships, that two are better than one. Living and working together is a great advantage to living and working alone, and adds these four things to life:

- Productivity (**they have a good reward for their toil**).
- Help in need (**if they fall, one will lift up the other**).
- Comfort in life (**they keep warm**).
- Safety and security (**two will withstand one**).

A threefold cord is not quickly broken. The Teacher gives a fascinating final line to this section dealing with the goodness of companionship. It might have been expected that he would praise the strength of a twofold cord; instead he noted that **a threefold cord is not quickly broken.** It is commonly understood that the third cord is God himself, and that a relationship intertwined with God is **a threefold cord that is not quickly broken.**

This is commonly applied - and well applied - to the idea of recognising and embracing God in the marriage relationship. Yet it is possible that, in the context of marriage and family, Solomon had children in mind with the picture of a threefold cord.

A threefold cord stands for the great value of plurality (more than one or even two) as opposed to being alone (vv.7-11).

¹³ Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who will no longer take advice. ¹⁴ One can indeed come out of prison to reign, even though born poor in the kingdom. ¹⁵ I saw all the living who, moving about under the sun, follow that youth who replaced the king; ¹⁶ there was no end to all those people whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Ecclesiastes 4:13-16

The Teacher relates an instance he observed of how the results of wisdom can be fleeting. In contrast to **an old but foolish king**, there once was **a poor but wise youth** who managed to rise above his humble beginnings and ascend to the throne

and an influential reign (vv.15-16a). Yet later generations will not rejoice in him; his success and popularity, even though gained by true wisdom, did not last.

Kidner concluded, “He has reached a pinnacle of human glory, only to be stranded there. It is yet another of our human anticlimaxes and ultimately empty achievements.”