

Ecclesiastes

Chapter 4

Evil Under the Sun

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. 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. 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. 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.

4:1-3 Once again King Solomon invites us to look with him into the world's misery. Previously he had talked about the world in general and about his own dissatisfaction. Now he focuses on the problems of others, beginning with the oppressed. One commentator explains the purpose of the Teacher's constant emphasis on human misery: "By thoroughly disgusting us with the world, and by making us realize its absolute vanity, God means to draw us to Himself... Through much tribulation must our hold on earthly things be loosened and ourselves enter into the kingdom of God. (PBC)

Unlike the unbeliever, we have a wonderful place to go when we leave this vale of tears. And unlike him we have something worth sharing while we live on earth – the love of Christ. (PBC)

4:1-2 Oppressed are discontented and impatient (cf Hab 1:1–4). Masters oppress servants, creditors oppress debtors, landlords oppress tenants, etc. Solomon expresses supreme pessimism. Deep in oppression, death seems more favorable than life (cf Jer 20:14–18; Ac 20:24; Rm 8:35–39; 2Co 1:8; Heb 12:1–3). Consider St Paul, who desires to be with Christ, yet remains a servant of the Gospel (Php 1:23–24). Ambrose: "What is more wretched than we, who are sent into this life as it were plundered and naked, with frail bodies, deceitful hearts, weak minds, anxious in respect of cares, slothful as to labor, prone to pleasures" (*NPNF* 2 10:178). (TLSB)

4:1 *oppressions*. A theme already touched on (3:16) and another ingredient in the human tragedy. To find life meaningless is sad enough, but to taste its cruelty is bitter beyond words. (CSB)

4:2 *more fortunate than the living*. See Job 3; Jer 20:14–18. For faith that sees a bigger picture see Ro 8:35–39. (CSB)

The Preacher is looking at this life simply as a scene of vanity and oppression, without reference to its connection with the life to come. Thus regarded, it seems to his earnest spirit an evil and not a good, so that the best thing is to have no experience of it. (CB)

4:3 New life holds great potential. The unborn are precious in God’s sight. To be alive at any age is to glorify God. (TLSB)

4:4–6 Neither hard work (motivated by envy) nor idleness brings happiness. (CSB)

4:4 *all the toil and all the skill*. This too is meaningless unless done with God’s blessing (see 3:13; cf. the selfless success of Joseph, Ge 39). (CSB)

He is referring to the ceaseless activity and striving which in the end is meaningless. In a word, Solomon is describing work done without God. (PBC)

envy of his neighbor – This is the trouble connected with successful activity. Although industry is better than idleness, yet we ought not to set our heart upon present enjoyment from the successful accomplishment of our worldly enterprises; for prosperity brings in its train envy, opposition, and many other annoyances. (CB)

The root of violating Commandments 4–10 (esp 9 and 10). Cain envied Abel, Esau envied Jacob, and Saul envied David for the blessings received through faith (cf Pr 14:30). Those who excel in virtue will always attract criticism. (TLSB)

4:5 The ruin of the idle person is vividly pictured in 10:18; Pr 6:6–11; 24:30–34. (CSB)

Ultimate result of idleness: the person wastes away. The sluggard folds his hands to keep them warm. With malice, he refuses to labor (cf 2Th 3:6–13). Luther: “This again is a Hebrew phrase, meaning, ‘He torments himself.’ There is a similar statement in Job (13:14): ‘I will take my flesh in my teeth.’ He wants to say: ‘An inept and foolish man of this kind does not do himself any good, but he harms and opposes others, he envies others and tortures himself.’ In the state such a man is a rust or a worm, harmful to himself and to others” (AE 15:66). (TLSB)

This person wastes his estate, without renewing it by industry: one of the troubles of indolence. (CB)

The expression “ruins himself” literally means, “he eats his own flesh.” (PBC)

4:6 *quietness*. See Pr 30:7–9. Paul says the last word on this subject (Php 4:11–13). (CSB)

Seek a happy medium between doing nothing and doing too much. (TLSB)

two hands full of toil – These words imply that the increase of one’s estate is usually the increase of his trouble. (CB)

4:7–12 The loner, too, has a meaningless and difficult life if he is an unbeliever. (CSB)

The Teacher continues to enumerate life's problems. From the themes of oppression and toil, he takes us to loneliness. Like the labor rooted in envy, this topic hits close to home for many twentieth century Americans. Over half the adult population in this country is single. We hear much talk about alienation and loneliness, among the married as well as the single. It's not that there aren't plenty of people around. But the real, lasting friendship is hard to come by in our age of mobility, competition and superficiality. (PBC)

4:7 Solomon fixes his gaze on the fact that the more people gain, the more they want. Their drive for more robs them of enjoyment. (TLSB)

4:8 *person who has no other* – Solomon considered another example of vanity, that of the miser who toils for wealth without an heir. (CB)

The highest foolishness is to labor and gain when one has no dependent spouse or offspring. If you gain wealth, share it. (TLSB)

Sometimes very rich and famous people spend their last years living almost like hermits. Names like Howard Hughes and Elvis Presley come to mind. (PBC)

he never asks – These words are not in the original Hebrew. Nor are they any quotation marks; the ancient Hebrew has no such thing. The translators have supplied these items to clarify that the rich man is speaking to himself. We can see from this interesting little sidelight how thoroughly Solomon put himself into the other man's situation. The Teacher quite simply and naturally slips into the words and thoughts of another. This is the same thing Solomon did earlier in the chapter with the brief exchange between the hard working man and the fool. (PBC)

4:9 *two are better than one* – Value of companionship or friendship. God designed us as social beings (cf Gn 2:18). Consider the gifts of marriage, children, congregation, community, and nation. (TLSB)

4:10-11 God's people encourage one another to mercy, love, and good works (cf Mt 5:23–24; 18:15–18; Gal 6:1–2). (TLSB)

4:12 *a threefold cord is not quickly broken*. A climactic construction. (CSB)

Two or three people make work a pleasure and strengthen one another. Together, they reap greater blessings. Luther: "A certain wise father, when he was about to die, commands his sons to be present. He gives them a bundle of sticks to break. Although they could not break them all at the same time, they did break them individually. In this way he taught his sons that their riches would be secure if they were in concord with one another and mutually assisted one another. For through concord small things grow, but through discord they are scattered and brought to naught" (AE 15:69). (TLSB)

In many areas of life strength does lie in numbers. The individual Christian who thinks he can get along without a church should keep this in mind. We need the cooperation, help, warmth and defense of those who share the common treasure of faith. (PBC)

4:13–16 Advancement without God is another example of the meaninglessness of secularism. (CSB)

4:13-14 The Almighty God lifts up and He deposes. He places people in positions of authority as His servants and as servants of His people. (TLSB)

4:13 *old and foolish king* – It must have been difficult for King Solomon to talk this kind of situation. His own sad example could not have been far from his thoughts or those of his pious contemporaries. Among the ancients age was usually equated with wisdom. For an old person to be foolish, then was a disgrace. (PBC)

It is better to be wise, young, and unknown than to be a foolish public servant. There is no security in the crown (cf Pr 27:24), and it is foolish to reject admonition, counsel, and accountability. Titles among people do not bring absolute respect. (TLSB)

4:14 *he went from prison to the throne* – His wisdom elevates him from a prison to the throne of an old king. (CB)

Consider the rise of Joseph to serve Pharaoh (Gn 39–41) instead of the sovereign king born to his inheritance. The latter will not be admonished and must resign his crown. (TLSB)

Since the youth's background is not specific, we may conclude that Solomon is not talking about a particular individual. He is telling a story which often repeats itself with slight variations in the details. The young man arises from humble beginning, overcomes obstacles, becomes king in place of the foolish old ruler. Once the wise young youth is settled in power, some of his glory begins to tarnish. Like any other mortal he makes mistakes. The cycle is then complete, awaiting another young man. (PBC)

History is full of people who fit this general pattern. The Bible relates how Joseph went from prison to the second highest position in Egypt (Genesis 41). Despite his rise to power, Joseph kept his wisdom and faith. Most stories didn't end so happily. Israel's first king, Saul, started in humility. But after he came to power he fell from faith and eventually ended his own life (1 Samuel 31). David and Solomon began their reigns well, but both fell into grievous sins while king. David also had to contend with the rebellion of his son Absalom, who tried to seize the throne (2 Samuel 15-18). The reign of the Roman Emperor Nero started out with hope and rejoicing but became notorious for its depravity and cruelty. What holds true in the world of rulers and politicians also applies to the fields of business, sports and entertainment. (PBC)

4:15 *that youth* – The prince. People look to the king's successor as one who will serve justly and equitably. (TLSB)

4:16 *those who come later will not rejoice in him* – It is the high prerogative of wisdom to raise men from obscurity to eminent stations. Yet their greatness cannot continue by reason of death, and besides, it generally brings to them more personal trouble than comfort; so that they, in common with all other men, must place their final hope in the rest that remaineth for the people of God. (CB)

A wise ruler's success is soon forgotten. (TLSB)

Ch 4 Hold sacred the gifts of marriage, children, family, and the authorities put in place among us. Do not regard the accolades and accoutrements of the world as more important than the Lord and His gracious gifts. Though we continually search for contentment in this "under the sun" existence, Christ is our eternal Lord and King of kings. • Dear God and Father, thank You for

Your infinite goodness and love toward us. You keep us in Your Word, in faith, and in prayer. By this we are humbled and do not depend on our own wisdom, but glory alone in Your power, for when we are weak, You are strong. Amen. (TLSB)