

“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. . . .” —*Ecclesiastes 4:1 (NASB)*

“Many a man proclaims his own loyalty, but who can find a trustworthy man?” —*Proverbs 20:6*

In many ways, the book of **Ecclesiastes** serves as a commentary on the consequences of Adam’s fall, illustrated with observations and examples drawn from Solomon’s own day. Most dominant in this regard is Ecclesiastes repeated allusions to Yahweh’s curse of Adam recorded in Genesis 3:17b–19,

Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; and you will eat the plants of the field; by the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

Ecclesiastes forces its readers to come to terms with life outside the Garden of Eden—with life that cannot be *paradise* but is instead *cursed, broken, and in need of redemption*. One of the most practical implications of this reality is that human relationships manifest this brokenness in the most personal and painful of ways. Not only did Adam and his descendants become enemies of God that day when he fell, but Adam and all his descendants became enemies of each other. From that day on, man became “born for trouble, as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7).

That Adam plunged his descendants into perpetual strife is demonstrated soon after his sin in the garden, in his firstborn’s murder of his brother (Gen 4:1–16). Hatred, envy, pride, and disloyalty are all put on vivid display as Cain rises up against his brother and kills him for offering a better sacrifice. Every natural human relationship that follows manifests these vices in one way or another. And as with Cain, the result is separation, isolation, and loneliness. As C. S. Lewis stated, “Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay.”

**Ecclesiastes chapter 4 is devoted specifically to describing the consequences of the fall for human relations.** In four specific scenes, Solomon shows the ubiquity of the vices that motivated Cain’s murder of Abel. Humanity has not improved since the fallout of Adam’s disobedience. Consequences of the fall continue to affect every sphere of human relations. If anything, the general state of humanity in this regard will only get worse (see 2 Tim 3:1–5).

Solomon describes these four scenes with emotional intensity. He repeatedly emphasizes that the circumstances he describes are commonly experienced (Eccl 4:1, 4, 7). He assesses these examples repeatedly as evidence of the fleetingness of this life (4:3, 4, 7, 8, 16). In many ways, Ecclesiastes 4 is a lament—a **lament over human indifference, envy, selfishness, and disloyalty**.

### **I. A Lament over Human Indifference (4:1–3)**

Solomon writes,

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 on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them. So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. 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. (Eccl 4:1–3)

Solomon begins by looking at the brokenness of human relationships within the context of *authority structures*. He looks not to what is behind the scenes, but to what is in plain sight—to that which everyone sees, and no one disputes. Included in this may be his reflections on the failed aspects of his own rule (see especially 1 Kings 11), but it extends beyond that. It is a *broad view* of all that he observes “**being done under the sun**” (v. 1). As a king

with extensive connections both to neighboring nations and distant peoples, and as one with an unsurpassed appetite for investigation and learning, Solomon is in a unique position to comment on the state of human authority structures.

What does he see? **Oppression**. To emphasize this point he repeats the root term three times in a short span: “the acts of **oppression** . . . the tears of the **oppressed** . . . the side of their **oppressors**” (v. 1a). Although Solomon’s focus is on the realm of political authority, his observation holds true for every sphere of existence. To one degree or another, in everyday life outside the Garden, the natural man constantly jockeyes for the upper hand in every relationship, and then uses that newly acquired standing for personal gain—no matter the cost to those below him. This is true not only of government, but applies to relationships within marriage, family, business, education, and so on. In fact, devoid of the fear of God, every approach attempted to remedy this reality only further entrenches abuse. The very activists claiming to bring “social justice” subtly take advantage of these grievous injustices to develop platforms to pursue their own power. The only difference is that a different category is now oppressed.

It is interesting to note that back in chapter 3, Solomon already commented on the judgment that awaits oppressors:

Furthermore, I have seen under the sun *that* in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness. I said to myself, “God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man,” for a time for every matter and for every deed is there.” (3:16–17)

But Solomon’s attention here is not on that future judgment, as important as that is. Instead, in chapter 4 he laments the effects of oppression *in the here and now*. His focus is not merely on the reality of oppression, as evil as that is. Instead, his present concern is about **the loneliness experienced by the oppressed**. For the sake of emphasis, Solomon repeats the clause “**they had no one to comfort them**” *twice* (4:1). In the world outside the Garden, even the tears of an oppressed man garner no sympathies; he is *alone*, surrounded by *indifference*.

To emphasize the shocking nature of this reality, Solomon employs a proverbial “**better-than**” saying (vv. 2–3). He first symbolically commends “**the dead who are already dead**” for the fact that their experience or witness of injustice has come to a definitive end (see again 3:16–17). But even “**better off than**” the dead are those who have never been made conscience of such atrocities. The capacity for one man’s cruelty over another, and then, the capacity for indifference to the plight of those who suffer, is such that those who have never seen or experienced such things are deemed *better off*! (For a similar example of such exasperation, see Job’s disappointment in Job 3:3–5 and 11–19; or Jeremiah 20:14–18).

Such a realization causes Solomon to despair of “**the evil activity that is done under the sun**” (Eccl 4:3). This life is full not only of oppression, but of indifference.

## II. A Lament over Human Envy (4:4–6)

Solomon next visits the scene of human relationships within the context of *work*. He again bases his assessment on what is openly observable to human experience: “**I have seen . . .**” (v. 4a). He expresses the conclusion of his observation unequivocally: “**every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor**” (v. 4a). He then follows it with another summary judgment: “**This too is vanity and striving after wind**” (v. 4a).

As the Mosaic Law repeatedly emphasized, a large part of what should motivate us to work and to prosper should be our **love of neighbor**. However, what motivates most is the desire to look better and have more *than* our neighbor. In the world outside the Garden, envy fuels the economy. And it is this very vice which has unleashed some of the deadliest, unthinkable actions by men against their neighbors.

“Mortals can be as cruel and inhuman to each other in unnecessary competition as they can be in outright oppression. Often the rule of the business world is the law of the jungle.”  
—Walter Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 111

After stating his chief observation (v. 4), Solomon again employs proverbial sayings to illustrate his point (vv. 5–6). He first recognizes an exception to what he has just stated, but still points to this exception’s destructive nature: **“The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh” (v. 5)**. The **“folding of the hands”** recalls Solomon’s frequent proverbs on the evil of indolence (Prov 6:10–11; 10:4; 19:15; 20:13; 21:25–26; 24:33–34; etc.), and the **“consuming of one’s flesh”** points to the lazy man’s self-cannibalism. Such a man refuses to work because he loves himself so much. His self-love is so strong that he is perfectly content to destroy himself in the process. Obviously, such a man has no love for neighbor.

By this proverb Solomon acknowledges that **work itself is not the issue; motivation is**. A lazy man who refuses to work is just as evil as the man motivated by envy. Both are motivated by *self-love*. Instead, the motivation to work must include—to a very large degree—the desire to benefit one’s family and neighbors. (For similar instruction from the Apostle Paul, see 1 Thessalonians 4:9–12 and 1 Timothy 5:8.)

Solomon then returns to his chief emphasis by issuing another **“better-than”** saying: **“One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind” (v. 6)**. Whereas v. 5 described the problem of too little ambition, v. 6 describes the problem of too much. The **“rest”** Solomon envisions is that of *contentment*—the necessary ingredient needed to balance all ambition, to mortify every envy, and to cultivate compassion for one’s fellow man. In sum, one of the two hands we’ve been given (symbols for labor) should always be filled with *contentment*.

### III. A Lament over Human Selfishness (4:7–12)

Solomon describes a third sphere of human relationships affected by the corrosive nature of sin: that of the *family* (4:7–12). Once again, his observation is based on common human experience: **“Then I looked again” (v. 7a)**. As he does, he sees only **“vanity under the sun” (v. 7b)**.

What Solomon describes is a relatively common situation in our day, when divorce rates have never been higher and birth rates have never been lower: **“There was a certain man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor” (v. 8a)**. The man Solomon describes is one so focused on personal promotion that he had no time for relationships—for brother or for son. The selfishness of ceaseless labor had left him with *no one to care for* throughout life, and thus, *no one to care about* him at the end of life. Solomon expands his observation further: **“Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches and he never asked, ‘And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?’” (v. 8b)**. Solomon’s assessment? **“This too is vanity and it is a grievous task” (v. 8c)**.

Selfishness prevents the self-absorbed man from seeing the bigger picture. By the time he recognizes the short-sightedness of his narcissism, it is too late. He can’t produce offspring to enjoy the fruit of his labor. Solomon once again reminds us that the fruit of our labor and success is to be enjoyed also by others—first and foremost by our families. When it is enjoyed only by ourselves it turns into poison.

Solomon adds to this observation a series of proverbial expressions related to *loneliness*, all drawn from common Ancient Near Eastern experiences. First, **“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. 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” (vv. 9–10)**. The solitary man is helpless in the case of an *accident*; but a companion is able to help in the moment of desperation. Second, **“if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone?” (v. 11)**. The solitary man will suffer pain and loss in the case of *hardship*; but a companion is able to share in the moment of need. Third, **“if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him” (v. 12a)**. The solitary man will suffer defeat in the case of an *attack*; but a companion is able to

defend in the moment of threat. Finally, **“A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart” (v. 12b)**. There is strength in numbers. Companionship brings great benefit, even in the world outside the Garden.

#### IV. A Lament over Human Disloyalty (4:13–16)

Solomon ends this section with another illustration of sin’s impact on human relations—this one taken again from the realm of politics. The paragraph (vv. 13–16) is one of the more difficult ones of the book to interpret in the minor details—particularly as it relates to the number of characters Solomon has in mind (are there *two* or *three*?). But the overall message is clear: ***the masses are fickle***. In other words, the strength found in numbers (“A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart,” v. 12) has its limits (see Prov 18:24).

Solomon tells the story of how leadership so easily changes hands. The account can be seen in three stages involving three different leaders:

- **Stage One:** **“an old and foolish king”** reigns, **“who no longer knows *how* to receive instruction” (v. 13)**. His sensitivity to the needs of his people and the wisdom of his counselors is gone—and so is his people’s support.
- **Stage Two:** **“A poor yet wise lad is better . . . For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom” (vv. 13–14)**. His wisdom and teachableness rightly endear him to the people, allowing them to overlook his humiliating social background. He replaces the old king.
- **Stage Three:** **“I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him” (v. 15)**. Now a new, third candidate appears, not characterized by anything of note, yet the people throng to his side and make him king. But even his support will wane: **“There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him” (v. 16a)**.

What is Solomon’s point? *The masses are fickle and unfaithful*. And **“this too is vanity and striving after wind” (v. 16b)**. Or as he states elsewhere, “Many a man proclaims his own loyalty, but who can find a trustworthy man?” (Prov 20:6).

#### Hear the Preacher!

1. Put off indifference; put on compassion.
2. Put off envy; put on contentment.
3. Put off selfishness; put on servanthood.
4. Put off fickleness; put on loyalty.

Indeed, as C. S. Lewis stated, “Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay.” But he went on to say, “But look for Christ, and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.” In Christ, the problem of loneliness is once-and-for-all solved (see Rom 8:31–39).

#### For Discussion

1. How compassionate are you to those undergoing oppression? Are you able to “mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15)? How can you grow in this area?
2. What motivates you to get up and work each day? Do you see your labor as an opportunity to “love your fellow man”?
3. What are the things that you envy in others? Are you able to “rejoice with those who rejoice”—i.e., to celebrate sincerely the achievements and success of your family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers?
4. What needs to change in your life to balance the attitudes of contentment and ambition better?
5. Would you describe yourself as a solitary man? How much of your weekly effort is devoted to cultivating relationships with others? What practices can you put in place to foster more community in your life?

**Audio, Video, and handouts for this session:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next meeting:** January 17, Ecclesiastes 5:1–9, “Whom Shall I Fear?”