

Men *of the* **Word**

Searching for Significance

A Study in
Ecclesiastes

Wednesdays, 7–9 pm
Worship Center

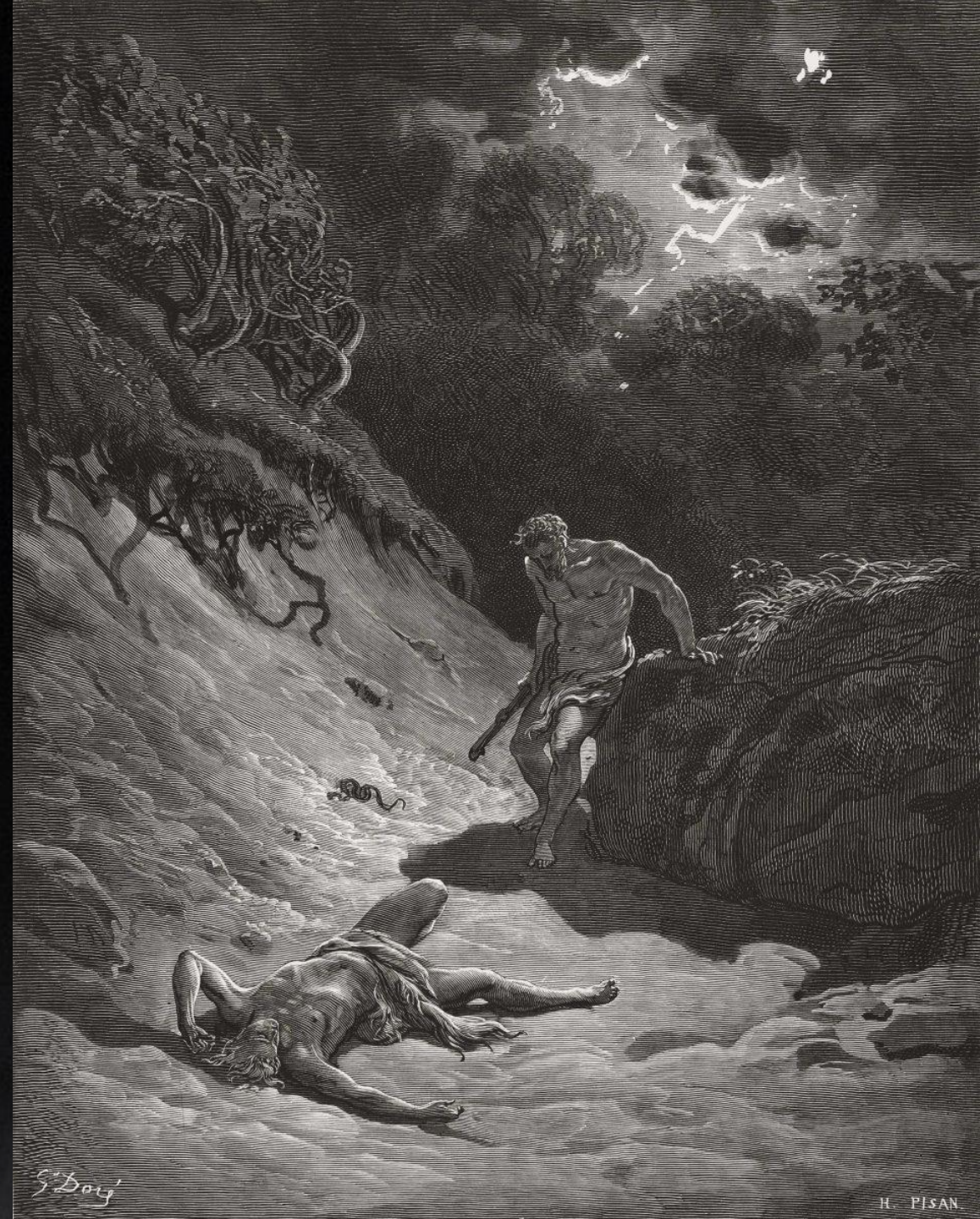
The Solitary Man

Ecclesiastes 4:1–16

- The book of Ecclesiastes serves as a commentary on the consequences of Adam's fall.
- Ecclesiastes forces us to come to terms with life outside the Garden—with life in a world that is cursed, broken, and in need of redemption.
- A daily reminder of this life outside the Garden is the discord manifested in human relationships.
- Ecclesiastes 4 focuses on this reality.



- Ecclesiastes 4 records Solomon's lament over the brokenness of human relationships.
- The anti-social effects of the Fall not only separate man from God, but man from man.
- In four scenes, Solomon describes how the depravity latent in Cain's relationship to Abel (Gen 4:1–16) manifests itself in human society.
- Whether directly or indirectly, sin leaves man *alienated, alone, solitary*.





I. A Lament over Human Indifference

Ecclesiastes

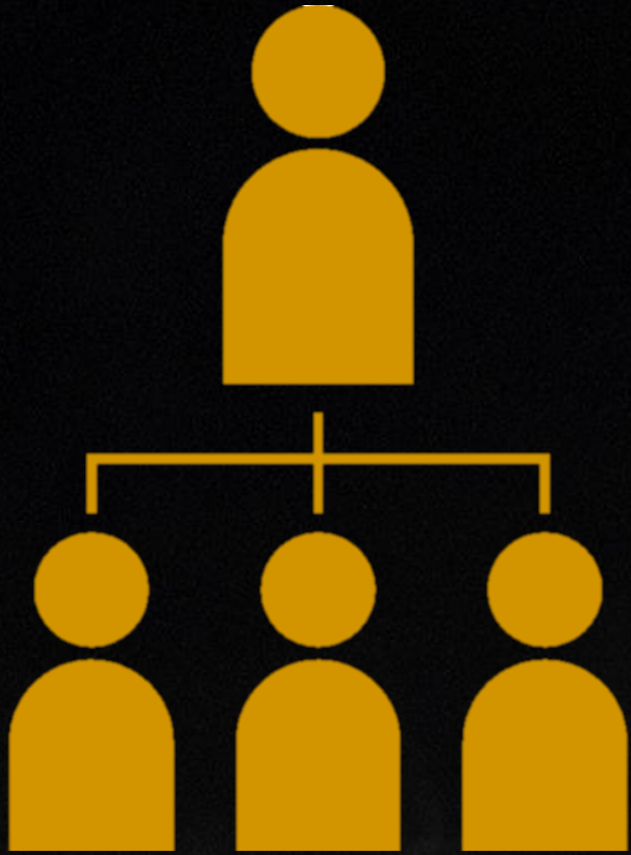
4:1–3

*“I looked again at all the
acts of oppression.”*

“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.”

—Ecclesiastes 4:1–3

- Solomon begins by looking at the brokenness of human relationships within the context of *authority structures*.
- He bases his conclusion on what is observable to human experience: **“Then I looked again . . .” (v. 1a).**
- He also bases his conclusion on what is ubiquitous: **“at all the acts . . . which were being done under the sun” (v. 1a).**
- Central to Solomon’s observation is the reality of *oppression*: **“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” (v. 1a).**



- The primary focus of Solomon's observation is the *political sphere*, but the reality he observes extends to *all arenas* of human authority structures.
- Human depravity corrupts the exercise of authority, turning relationships into a constant struggle for power and subjugation.
- To one degree or another, in everyday life outside the Garden, man jockey for the upper hand within every relationship and then uses that position for personal gain.
- In fact, devoid of the fear of God, every approach attempted to remedy this acknowledged reality only further entrenches the abuses.

- Back in 3:16–17, Solomon already observed that the injustices of is world “God will judge.”
- But Solomon’s focus in 4:1–3 is different: he laments the effects of oppression *in the here and now*.
- **“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 [the oppressed] had no one to comfort them” (v. 1b).**
- For the sake of emphasis, Solomon repeats his observation about the plight of the oppressed: *they had no one to comfort them*.
- 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.
- **“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.” (vv. 2–3).**
- The cruelty of one man over another in this world is such that those who no longer witness or experience it are much better off.
- But those who have never even witnessed or experienced it all are even better off still.
- A true understanding of such evil is so overwhelming that it causes Solomon to despair of this life “under the sun” (cf. Jer 20:14–18).



II. A Lament over Human Envy

Ecclesiastes

4:4–6

*“Every labor . . . is the
result of rivalry.”*

“I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is *the result of* rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.”

—Ecclesiastes 4:4–6

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



- What should motivate us to work and to prosper should be our *love of neighbor*.
 - But 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.
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- “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).

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“When we look at the broken, fallen world through a biblical lens, what we see is that the world is a place where our neighbor can be damned so long as we can be king. It’s a place where we often relentlessly pursue the neighbor above us by willingly stepping on the head of the neighbor beneath us. When we pursue gain because we think that’s all there is to be had, others are going to get hurt. That’s what happens.”

—David Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 70

- After stating his chief observation (v. 4), Solomon again employs proverbial sayings to illustrate his point (vv. 5–6).
- He first recognizes the exception, but still points to its destructive nature: **“The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh” (v. 5).**
- The **“folding of the hands”** recalls his frequent proverbs on the evil of indolence (Prov 6:10–11; 10:4; 19:15; 20:13; 21:25–26; 24:33–34; etc.).
- The **“consuming of one’s flesh”** points to the lazy man’s ironic self-cannibalism—refusing to work because he loves himself so much, he systematically destroys himself.
- By this Solomon acknowledges that work itself is not the issue; a lazy man who refuses to work is just as evil as the man motivated by envy.



- 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 key ingredient to balance all ambition, to mortify envy, and to cultivate love for one’s neighbor.
- One of the two hands we’ve been given (symbols for labor) should always be filled with *contentment*.

“It is the two-handed toiling for wealth as an end in itself that is a root of evil. It grows like a strangling vine around the heart, and the harm spreads its tentacles in several different directions at once.”

—Gibson, *Living Life Backward*, 75

“It is vain for you to rise up early, to retire late, to eat the bread of painful labors; for He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.”

—**Psalm 127:2**



III. A Lament over Human Selfishness

Ecclesiastes
4:7–12

*"His eyes were not
satisfied with riches."*

“Then I looked again at vanity under the sun. There was a certain 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 am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?’ This too is vanity and it is a grievous task.”

—Ecclesiastes 4:7–8

- Solomon next visits the scene of human relationships within the context of *family*.
- Once again, his observation is based on daily human experience: **“Then I looked again” (v. 7a)**. As he does, he only sees **“vanity under the sun” (v. 7b)**.



- What Solomon describes is a common situation: **“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 he describes is one so focused on personal promotion that he had no time for relationships—for brother or for son.

- 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)**
- His 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 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 is poison.

“Preoccupied with climbing the corporate ladder, a man often tells himself that he does so in order to take care of his family, but, in reality, he is caught up in his projects to make a name for himself. His family soon becomes a casualty due to his neglect for their real welfare.”

—William Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 79

“Money is their only kin.” —Duane Garrett, *Ecclesiastes*, 307

- Solomon adds to this observation a series of proverbial expressions related to *loneliness*, all drawn from common Ancient Near Eastern experience.



- 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 despair.

- Second, **“Furthermore, 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, **“And 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.
- Fourth, **“A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart” (v. 12b).**
 - There is strength in numbers; companionship brings great benefit.



IV. A Lament over Human Disloyalty

Ecclesiastes
4:13–16

*"The ones who will come
later will not be happy
with him."*

“A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows *how* to receive instruction. For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him. 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, for this too is vanity and striving after wind.”

—Ecclesiastes 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) only goes so far.
- **Proverbs 18:24** – “A man of too many friends comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”

- Solomon tells the story of how leadership easily changes hands.
- 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.

- 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).
- Solomon’s point? *The masses are fickle and unfaithful*, and “**this too is vanity and striving after wind**” (v. 16b).
- **Proverbs 20:6** – “Many a man proclaims his own loyalty, but who can find a trustworthy man?”

Hear the Preacher!

*"The words of wise
men are like goads . . ."*



“You shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.”

—Leviticus 19:18b

“For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another; not as Cain, *who* was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother’s were righteous.”

—1 John 3:11–12

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.

A black and white photograph of an open book with a hand turning a page. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the texture of the book's pages and the hand. The title "Men of the Word" is overlaid in white text.

Men *of the* Word

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