

## Hardship and Companionship Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

Today we are going to talk about people *in general* and the need for companionship *in particular*.

- I don't know if you've noticed it, but **there are a lot of people in the world! We were talking about this yesterday re our dog: he's a good dog except when he's around people. That's a problem because there are a lot of them — and who enter our home!**
- Who should you beware of? Who should you listen to? Who should you befriend? Who needs you?
- These are important questions, and we're made aware of their significance especially in **times of transitions: new school, new city, new church (many of you!). [Pray]**

A few weeks ago, I saw my brother Brad walk into the auditorium with his two daughters, and I felt great sympathy for him, as I knew his wife was on a long IGP trip.

- **"It's not good for man to be alone" so I gave him a big hug. We had a bro moment.**
- **"It's not good for man to be alone" — that was before sin entered the world!**
- **2-3 days is all I can do before I start getting that, "I need my bride!" feeling. That's why I keep my trips are short as possible!**
- **And when she was gone for a long period of time recently, I couldn't wait to get here on Sunday morning! I needed the fellowship of the church.**

We are made for relationships.

- We are made in the image of God, the **Triune God** who has existed eternally in relationship.

Ecclesiastes has been talking about a lot of **hardship** in this life under the sun – echoing the early chapters of Genesis.

Added to the hardship, is this chapter now on **companionship** – also echoing the theology of the early chapters of Genesis.

We find the problem of **loneliness** throughout the text: ***the oppressed are lonely, the wealthy business person is lonely, and the king is lonely.***

**T**here's much wisdom here:

We see that relationships are more important than achievements and wealth.  
And contentment is greater than accumulating wealth and being famous.

**"When a man comes to die, no matter his talents and influence and genius, if he dies unloved his life must be a failure to him and his dying a cold horror." -- John Steinback**

But as David Gibson reminds us that the subject of relationships is often *not* the dominant question in our minds; the dominant question in our minds is about *me*, not *we*.

- ***Where am I going with my life?***
- ***How am I doing today?***

- “The one person I am always acutely aware of is me.” (DG)

The Preacher here is trying to give you a **better way to live**. Notice this word “**better**”

- Ecc 4:1–16 contains the first of two clusters of better-than sayings (see also 7:1–12).
- We do this in life ... “Lebron is better than MJ.” “Popeyes chicken sandwich is better than chi filet” “Apple is better than Samsung.” “Duke is...” let’s not go there...

The better-than sayings are a common proverbial style.

- Here, the preacher says we are **better together**.
- The question is not “How am I doing?” But “How are we doing?”
- And we see that this better way to live brings meaning and joy.

If you love with a concern for the people beside you – friends, family, neighbors, spouse, brothers/sisters in the church – it actually brings meaning and joy.

- It brings “quietness” (v. 6) – that is a calmness, a tranquility.

Ecclesiastes has been teaching us to “**enjoy life**” and here the added element is that we should also “enjoy life *with others*.”

There are “4 sights under the sun” in the text on hardship and companionship and the better way to live. We see these four subjects:

- **Oppression** (4:1-3). Isolation increases the pain of oppression. (4:1-3)
- **Toil** (4:4-8)
  - Envy of neighbor often motivates ambition.
  - Greed can lead to isolation and emptiness.
- **Friendship** (9-12). True friendship brings many blessings.
- **Leadership** (13-16): Good leaders pursue humility before God and others.

Through these observations, Solomon wants us to see the “better” way to live.

### #1: The Oppressed and Their Lack of Comforters (4:1-3)

In chapter 3:16ff, the author lamented the lack of justice in the world.

He continues thinking about oppression here, *and* he reflects about how the oppressed have no one to comfort them – the latter is emphasized by repetition.

**1:** The raw deal they’ve been dealt – “the tears of the oppressed” (**cf., 5:8**)

- In the Bible oppression involves, but it is not limited to, the following:
  - Cheating one’s neighbor of something.
  - Making unjust gain.
  - Abusing power.
  - Neglecting or harming the vulnerable.
  - Denying people of rights and justice.
- These things leave the oppressed in “**tears.**” In Exodus they “groan” under slavery.
- Oppression is awful – genocide, gendercide, killing the unborn, sex trafficking, terrorist attacks, sex abuse, child abuse, etc.

- James 1:27 says to care for the orphan and widow are in their **“affliction.”**

Qoheleth’s main concern is here is the fact that the oppressed have no comforters!

- He repeats the phrase twice in verse 1: and they have no comforter.
- He says, **isolation increases this pain.**
- This was the same cry repeated in the first poem in Lamentations (1:2, 9, 16, 17, 21).
- They have no one to speak for them, to be with them, to comfort them.
- This is why we happily partner with various ministries – we want to do something about oppression and we want to comfort the oppressed.

**2-3:** The darkness of oppression leads the Preacher to make this said conclusion: death is preferable.

- He often overstates his cases, as is customary in wisdom literature to make a point.
- “Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame?” (Jer 20:18)
- “It would have been better if that man had not been born” (Matt 26:24)
- We may feel like this at times, as we look at those who are cruelly persecuted, or inhumanely tortured...

Solomon is considering life under the sun.

It is filled with oppression and the oppressed are often isolated.

**Who do they need?**

- **They need the comforting Savior, and they need God’s people to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.**
- They need friends! They need family! They need community!
- They need God’s people welcoming the stranger, comforting the hurting, visiting the imprisoned, satisfying the hungry.
- You may not be a William Wilberforce doing heroic work on massive scale, but you can serve the refugee, visit the elderly, adopt an orphan.
  - **Reflecting this last week on our time in Ukraine: those kids would light up when we visited them... Many of you have seen this sort of thing... they have no comforters.**
- What many of us enjoy all the time, is absent from many – the gift of comforting friends.

## **#2: Toil and Our Motivations (4:4-8)**

The next sight under the sun concerns work – our motives and our relationships are considered with the act of toil.

He mentions four topics related to toil: (1) envy, (2) laziness, (3) contentment, & (4) greed

### **A. Envy (4:4)**

Why do you work so hard?

- We can have twisted motivations. Are you **driven by rivalry? Power? Status?**
- Solomon sees the desire to outdo others as the motive for many.

- “I want to win” (Nacho)

**When you see someone successful (or they have something you want: job, situation, abilities, girlfriend/boyfriend) what is your response? Is it envy?**

**This is a temptation even among Christians... even among those in ministry  
“Jealousy and selfish ambition” is a “vile practice” (James 3:16)**

**When we envy someone we usually do three things:**

### **1. Fantasize about Them**

- You overestimate their greatness and idolize them.
- This leads to wanting another’s life rather than being grateful for your lot, and being faithful with what God has given you to do.

### **2. Demonize Them. Envy can turn wicked.**

- You hate the person you envy.
- You criticize/attack them;
- You gossip about them. Gossip is often motivated by satanic gossip.
- You rejoice in their downfall. That’s evil. When your joy is tied to the downfall of others that’s evil.

### **3. Compete with Them**

- You want to beat them — you want to keep up with them.
- If it is impossible to rejoice at their success, then you have a problem.

**How easy is it to live an envy-driven life instead of a Christ-driven life? (cf., Prov 6:34; 14:30)**

**When you see a Christian brother/sister someone working skillfully and faithfully, we should:**

- 1. Rejoice in their success.**
- 2. Learn from them.**
- 3. Go fulfill our jobs for God’s glory and for the good of others.**

**And rivalry will not produce healthy relationships.**

- “Envy makes the bones rot” (14:30)
- “Jealousy” makes a man furious (Prov 6:34).

**Rivalry and envy will not make you a good friend or a comforter to the oppressed because you are obsessed with yourself and outdoing others.**

**We should work hard out of love for God and for people, not out of envy and rivalry.**

### **B. Laziness (4:5)**

- You could just not be driven at all! He shows us a picture of the sluggard next.
  - This is not the working poor; but the lazy person who refuses to work.

“The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh” (v. 5)

- What a picture! Self-cannibalism.
- Someone who folds his hands is the person who does not work and consequently destroys himself (eats his own flesh).
- There’s no food in the cupboard **so he’s gnawing away at his knuckles** (cf., Prov 6:9-11).

Workaholics are often told they should spend less time in the office; the sluggard is told to spend at least some time in the office!

This person is often marked by several things:

- They think everyone should take care of them;
- They get mad when others don’t.
- They often befriend people of goodwill so someone else will do everything for them.

Proverbs adds this foolish lazy person is an immovable object.

- Not only will they not work, they will not listen either.
- Further, they constantly make excuses.
  - “**There is a lion in the road!**”
  - **Johnny, go cut the grass.**” “**I can’t. There’s a lion in the backyard.**” “**No there’s not.**”
  - “**Johnny, don’t you think it’s time to get your resume together.**” “**I can’t Mom. The security level is at orange.**” There’s a lion in the road.

Further they are “wise in their own eyes”

*The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes*

*than seven men who can answer sensibly. (26:16)*

- The sluggard view himself as somewhat of a genius.
- We are not to empower such behavior but rebuke this behavior.

### C. Contentment (4:6)

Here’s the better solution. This is the wise person.

- “**A handful of quietness**” is better than “**two handfuls of greed**”
- Two hands representing the attempt to **grab as much as possible, like kids after the piñata has been struck.**
- The workaholic is weighted down with everything, and cannot rest – he is “striving after the wind”

I love the one hand of **quietness**

- The content person has a calmness of soul.
- This person is working – he or she has a *handful*, but also gets to enjoy life and serve people.
- The picture set in contrast to the **clamorous noise of accumulating more.**

21st century: **Electricity, you can just go all night!**

- You end up with two handfuls. That's a foolish life!

The other hand is not mentioned; the other is for relationships and enjoyment.

- Everyday is not a vacation, you need to work (that's one hand).
- The other hand is for people, generosity, quietness, for rest, for family, to enjoy life.
- One hand is to produce and the other is to invest in others; reach out to others; put my arm out the hurting; to receive God's love from others; to make memories with friends and families.

The wise person sees I see life *like two hands*.

“There is great gain with godliness and contentment” (1 Tim 6:6).

- This is the good life that Solomon is commending – we read more about it elsewhere in the book like **9:7-10; 11:1-10**.
- To do this, we should value rest and peace and people over wealth and achievement.
- Jeremiah Burroughs said that the way to contentment is not by addition but by *subtraction*.

Have you learned to be content?

- **Look at Jesus**. As always, he shows us the wisest way to live.
- Jesus did not fold his hands as a sluggard, but worked.
- We do not find him envying people who had more — which was everyone!
- He trusted the Father for everything, and learned to be content.
- By his power and presence, he invites his to live that way.

#### **D. Greed (4:7-8)**

You can imagine the company chief executive, the hot shot successful person.

**Greed and frantic busyness has led to isolation and emptiness.**

- You can picture the compulsive money maker (Kidner) who doesn't stop to ask, or tries not to ask, “for whom am I toiling?” “Why am I living like this?”

He's rich but he's alone.

- **He obsesses over emails, meetings, reports... always thinking about the next thing...**
- This person has no space for a social life.
- This person has money and achievements but no family or friends.
  - **“It is possible to know the price of everything but the value of nothing” (Gibson)**

Don't be a greedy workaholic...

- Relationships are more important than achievements.

Money/Achievement won't satisfy because (1) you need companions, and (2) you will never think you have enough (5:10).

- Regarding the latter, this is important to remember that one of the ways you kill greed is by giving money away – investing it in others.

- Give gladly, generously, and regularly – and there is great joy in this act.

There is great value in life when we are in relationship to people and we work not just for ourselves, but for the good of others.

### #3: Friendship and Its Blessings (4:9-12)

After thinking on solitude, Solomon now considers the blessings of true companionship. You can see the contrast of “two” and “one” in the text. [read]

He lists four blessings:

#### A. Sharing/Working/Producing (9a).

- Success comes through cooperation.
- If you want to make money, do it with someone else – at least you have someone to share it with!
- Teamwork makes the dreamwork!
- This is true in every sphere:
  - I see it in *pastoring (what an incredible group of brothers I can't to pastor with)*,
  - *writing (editors don't get enough props!)*,
  - *in working on the home (could I move apart from my bride?), etc.*

#### B. Helping (10)

- “I’ve fallen and I can’t get up!”
- This is the ancient Near East, when it was hazardous to travel especially overnight...
- A fall by yourself may be fatal, esp at night.
- We need this not just for physical help – but also for friends to pull us up out of the pit of despair and sin!
- “Bear one another’s burdens and fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6).
- So you see the need for community... we will fall, we will have burdens...
- If you are consumed with work and not cultivate community, will there be anyone there to help?

#### C. Comforting/Giving Emotional Support (11)

- Amen campers.
- This refers to travelers on cold winter nights – we should not read a same sex relationship into this.
- The picture is trying to survive by sleeping close together so that you can stay warm.
  - Forest Gump Scene. Bubba: “I'm gonna lean up against you, you just lean right back against me. This way, we don't have to sleep with our heads in the mud.”
- The proverb make be alluding to more than this physical act of staying warm, though; it could refer to giving emotional support to a friend who is experiencing grief, adversity or great temptation.
- Technology may aid a relationship but it can't replace it. You need to be there!
- You can't keep each other warm online!

## D. Protecting (12)

- Ever been in a fight? One-on-one, you have a shot; but if you're up against two guys, then you have less of a shot!
- Even worse, when you try to fight the whole team! (Not saying I know anyone who did that as a Senior in high school!)

This picture is of a burglar or bandit seeking to do harm an individual who is traveling alone.

- It's better to have a traveling partner; there is safety in numbers.
- That's why we say, "I've got your back." I'm with you, watching out for you...
- There is safety in numbers. Batman Begins: Police Commissioner Gordon us up against the forces of darkness in Gotham City. But Batman comes forward and says, "Now we are two!"

And if companionship of two people is beneficial, how much better is *three*!

- Even if you don't travel; you will face temptations and trials along the journey of life — and how good is to to know you aren't alone — you have Christ defending you!
- When Martin Luther was asked how he overcame the Devil he said:  
"Well, when he comes knocking upon the door of my heart, and asks 'Who lives here?' the dear Lord Jesus goes to the door and says, 'Martin Luther used to live here, but he has moved out. Now I live here.'"

**Application: We have Christ and we have one another.**

That's better than having everything but having no one.

- This is quite different than the individualism that pervades Western culture.
- We need each other. We need "to stir up one another to love and good deeds."
- We need to "not neglect assembling together."
- We need to help, protect and give comfort.
- "The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer" (Bonhoeffer)...

## #4: Leadership and the Need for Humility (4:13-16)

Solomon began the sights of the oppressed, and concludes with sights of the King's palace.

**13-16:** So here's the story... There are two kings...

The first was an old and foolish King — who did not take advice. (13)

- He rules alone and he rules foolishly.
- He is "wise in his own eyes" (Prov 26:12)
- Success can make one over-confident, smug, and unteachable. I have seen this so many times and I do not want to be this.
- Kidner: See "the stubbornness of the man who has been too long in the saddle—who is out of touch and out of sympathy with the times, forgetting what it was like to be young, and fiery, as he once was himself."



The second king (who succeeded the first king) went from rags to riches – something similar to Joseph in Genesis. (14-15)

- But the second king, even though he had a large following, was eventually forgotten and replaced (16)
- “They knew not Joseph” (Ex 1:8)

So there are two principles here that call for humility.

### **First, leaders should humbly seek counsel with others.**

- Often we hear that older *leaders are wiser*, and that is certainly the case many times, but here we see that older leaders can also be foolish.
- You can be **an old fool** who has gotten better at doing evil, and just keep creating more problems!
- You can go from good to bad... Read Kings! Uzziah for example.. “When he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction (2 Chron 26:16).. he had reigned for 52 years but is destroyed by pride.
- This old fool is not teachable.
  
- Wisdom comes from humble godliness over time.
- **Are you getting older or are you getting wiser?**
  - These are not the same!

Younger leaders can be wiser than older leaders (Ps 119:100); the older can lose wisdom (Job 12:20).

It's not the age that makes the difference, but the heart.

- The disciples were very young.
- Timothy was in his early thirties.
- But Paul was about 60 when he wrote Romans, and wanted more mission!
- John was an old man when he wrote Revelation.

The question is will we be humble and teachable in whatever things we lead.

- Elihu has a good disposition, giving his elders the first hearing but not regarding them as infallible, since the Spirit of God can give one wisdom beyond his/her years (**Job 32:4-11**).

### **Second, leaders should humbly realize that fame and recognition are *short lived*.**

- Another king will replace the present king.
- Another president will replace the president.
- Another coach replaces the next coach.
- No pastor is irreplaceable either.
  - If I leave IDC, then you will still have worship next Sunday, and someone will preach! (I don't plan on that!).

### **Conclusion**

The text points us to Christ in a number of ways, as we consider **comfort**, **contentment**, and **community**.

In Jesus we find **comfort** – a comforter who is always with us.

- Because of Jesus, we are not alone.
- He is with us in our trials.

Because of Jesus we can be **content**.

- Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Heb 13:5-6)

**Community**. Through Jesus we are brought not only into a relationship with God but also with his people.

- We get to partner with him and one another in mission.

This all by grace — made possible through Jesus.

Our Christ experienced oppression and sorrow.

- He suffered and died alone, in order to bring us into right relationship with God and one another.
- He died for those of us who did not welcome and comfort the oppressed;
- He died
  - for the lazy;
  - for the envious;
  - for the self-absorbed greedy worker;
  - for the arrogant leader who think he/she is hot stuff.
- Our Christ died for such sinners; and by his power, he changes us:
  - into tender comforters,
  - into self-less people who love neighbor;
  - into people who are content with basic necessities because we have found Christ is enough — who is better than all pleasures;
  - into people who pour ourselves out for the hurting and the oppressed...
  - into servant leaders who prepare the way for the future...

And our Christ will end injustice and oppression once and for all – and bring us into sweet companionship with himself and all the redeemed forever.

And this King— the King of King’s — unlike other kings, **his glory will not fade away!**  
**He is the only king that is irreplaceable.**

He will be praised for ever and ever, Amen.