

ECCLESIASTES
Ecclesiastes 4:1-16
“The Cure for the Common Self”
March 17, 2024

Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

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. ¹

This is God's Word.

This chapter from the Preacher pulls no punches but leaves us wanting. There's much here to digest, so let's just frame this out today so we can track well together.

There are three main sections in this chapter. That's going to lead to our three main points.

These three things to consider:

- 1. OPPRESSION**
- 2. ISOLATION**
- 3. CORRUPTION**

Each of these is fueled by a primary source which interconnects. This ends up being a road map to emptiness, but don't leave early, because we have a better resolution than Solomon finds.

OPPRESSION is fueled by **ENVY**
ISOLATION is fueled by **SELF**
CORRUPTION is fueled by **GREED**

This is serious and seemingly not fun. This is definitely not the sugar-coated message that some desire, but like the bad tasting medicine that leads to healing, so too is this. Why? Because this is the Word of God.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 4:1–16.

OPPRESSION

Ecclesiastes 4:1

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

When we hear the word oppression certainly images of despair come to mind. In some cases, the word elicits very personal stories of trauma and despair. I am so sorry.

Oppression is serious and as Solomon takes a look around, he is confronted with that, by his own definition and experience is nothing less than oppressive.

Oppression has been defined as “accumulation—seeking after profit—without regard to the nature, needs, and rights of other people.”³ Biblically this often refers to the cheating of one’s neighbor of something for one’s own profit. Throughout Old Testament writings, we see laws and examples of stories where one person or set of persons oppresses another.

This is simply not ancient history as just a quick read of current news reveals this still happens. This is the sin nature of the depraved and all humanity is depraved and infected.

When Solomon is looking “under the sun” as he states, he sees that many people live “under the thumb” of abusive spouses, gang leaders, dictators, and evil ones in power.⁴

And now we read stories of invasions of nations by those under autocratic control. The abuse of people in areas of the world where

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 4:1.

³ Provan, Iain. *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 103.

⁴ O’Donnell, Douglas Sean. *Ecclesiastes: Reformed Expository Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2014), 95.

justice seems to have taken a backseat. Crimes committed by those who will seemingly not pay. The gang violence and atrocities of those who have taken over much of Haiti and the list just goes on. It leaves the Christians wondering “What can we do?” and from a culture of “Don’t just stand there, do something” we struggle in our desired response realizing that “Don’t just do something, stand there” may be our only option at the time.

Unfair, right?

What leads to such corruption as Solomon sees?

Envy is the fuel. The desire to have something someone else has – whether that be property, money, influence, power, or something else. Envy is the fuel which has been set ablaze.

Envy fuels such corruption.

But, maybe it is not as simple as that. As we continue to read this Holy Spirit inspired section of God’s Word, we see that the writer, the Preacher says what cannot be said.

Ecclesiastes 4:2-3

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.
⁵

For Christians who abhor the culture of death that permits abortion and euthanasia and devalues the worth of God’s image-bearers turning many into practical eugenics warriors, to say “the person never born is better off” or “you’d be better off dead than facing such corruption” is anathema to biblical truth.

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ec 4:2–3.

Choose life, right?

Absolutely. So, what is Solomon doing here? How can he say such things? Has he forgotten what he just stated in chapter three about eternity being written on our hearts?⁶ What is he feeling? Why does he say such?

It is hard to know, but what we do know is that these honest statements and questions coming from a man despairing all that he can see “under the sun” reveals that if you are living short-sighted and evaluating only what you can see with your eyes and based only on what you have personally experienced, you will end up missing the fullness of God’s story.

We only have to look ahead at Jesus and his life here on earth. How did he respond? What was he saying? Doing? With whom was he dining and spending time?

The oppressed are at the heart of God. Jesus declared in Luke, while quoting the prophet Isaiah, that he...

Luke 4:18-19

**18 “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”⁷**

Liberty to those who are oppressed.

⁶ O’Donnell, 96.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 4:18–19.

Thanks be to God.

Yet, Solomon is not there yet. He looks to the oppression and sees corruption in the workforce. He states in verses 4 through 6 that envy and the innate desire to succeed and defeat the competition creates a society of the haves and the have nots. He points out that much of our work is motivated by envy, by the sinful desire to get ahead in life by getting ahead of other people.⁸

Some say this is a proclamation against rivalry. That is not the case. There are plenty of healthy rivalries in life and even in the Old Testament. One commentator notes there is nothing in the context suggesting the challenge to excel to be unhealthy.⁹ However, when looking to biblical evidence of good rivalries, it is only in the divine-human relationship between God and man (God being a jealous God) and the marriage relationship between a husband and wife where jealousy and rivalry would be considered normative. These are the only two relationships that allow, actually require, exclusivity.¹⁰

Solomon then declares that the fool, he says “folds his hands and eats his own flesh.” What??

On one extreme the accusation of evil is to the one who works to succeed regardless of who is harmed.

The other end is the sluggard who “folds his hands” and refuses to do the work, either because he is lazy or just has given up trying to make ends meet. The grotesque imagery of self-cannibalism is what is described here. Thus, the one who won’t work is only destroying himself.¹¹ This theme of good work, for godly glory is evident throughout scripture and echoed by Paul in the New Testament clearly.

⁸ Ryken, Philip Graham. *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 110.

⁹ Ogden, G.S. *Qoholeth* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 67.

¹⁰ Longman, Tremper III. *The Book of Ecclesiastes: The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 137.

¹¹ Seow, Choon-Leong. *Ecclesiastes: Anchor Bible 18C* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 179.

Yet, as Solomon notes, oppression is happening and it bothers him greatly. He determines oppression is fueled by envy and this sinful reality remains.

ISOLATION

I wrote an article last week on the epidemic of loneliness now declared in our nation and throughout the world. The post-COVID world has revealed that people are really struggling to connect. Yet, this is nothing new. It is just heightened now.

There is an innate longing to belong and yet so many have abandoned this to be little more than a pipe dream. This may be why some just choose to live in a make-believe world of friends where their favorite sitcom characters hang around together, get into funny situations, drink coffee, find romantic partners, and fill all the empty gaps in their lives with solvable problems before the closing credits. This is the sitcom's answer to loneliness and sadly many discover that they cannot find such friends who "will be there for you" so they either settle into surface-level relationships with fake friends, collect online friends and likes, or seek to convince themselves that they do not need anyone else.

The truth is that God did not create us to be isolated. Thus isolation is a sinful reality under the sun and when embraced leads to destruction.

What fuels such? Maybe oppression and the hurt of being used for some. That is a good connection with the first portion of this chapter. Yet, for many, it is the buying in of a strategy developed by the enemy in the garden of Eden. God created man. He said it was not good for him to be alone. So he created woman to be with him. The relationship was perfect. There was harmony. There was love. God was glorified in the perfect union of the man and the woman.

Then the enemy appears and immediately attacks the perfection by isolating.

Is this not the way of a predator?

Isolate the prey. Then attack.

Eve is tempted. Sure, Adam was there, but the isolation tactic was to take her out. The lie was that God was holding out so the temptation was offered. Eve chose knowledge over God. Eve turns to Adam. Adam chose Eve over God. Both are sinning and both are banned from the perfect garden. Suddenly separation enters the story. Eventually...isolation.

Here we are millennia later and the same tactic to take out the image-bearers of God.

Yet, now more than perhaps in the past, is the self-actualization disguised as religious freedom.

It is too easy to throw stones at all the glass houses the worldly sinners live within. But what about our own glass houses?

You see, somewhere over the years, the word “religion” became a dirty word. You have heard it, right? It’s a relationship not a religion. It’s the evangelistic selling point that simultaneously dumps on the local church while elevating the individual. Subtle, but effective.

The church is wrong. Corrupt. Bad. Legalistic. I’m sure there are some which are these things. Yet, this relationship over religion seems to miss the point, or maybe it makes the point intended. But we are just blind to it.

If not the church, then certainly denominations are bad. Thus, the rise of non-denominationalism. Now, many non-denominational churches are solid, biblically sound, and right. Though some with multiple campuses and multimillion-dollar budgets may wave the banner of non-

denominationalism while effectively are a mini-denomination unto themselves.

Certainly some denominations have gone off the rails. Schisms and division have occurred and in some cases, rightly so. Christ did not die for the denomination, but the church is his bride.

Thus, to devalue the local church is to devalue the bride of Christ. When it comes to religion, don't throw away the word. Just check it with James 1:27.

That's subtle, but within the church the individualization cult – you know the Jesus and me stuff that leads people to join churches, or not join churches, based on their self-defined needs (aka wants.) Consumerism in the modern church is fueled by self. Sadly, the church (and that includes us) often feed this model either out of fear or ignorance, but never out of faithfulness.

The Three Dog Night sang that “One is the loneliest number” and they were right. Isolation is a killer. One can be stranded on a virtual island while surrounded by people. The challenge is that we need each other. The Bible is clear. The New Testament declares it with all the “one another” passages, but the sinful self will always push against it.

“But I tried to make friends at church and no one accepted me.” – I don't doubt that. Sorry. Being a friend is hard. Being an acquaintance is easy. Being family is painful. Being that person who sits next to another in Sunday School is easy. Being others-focused is challenging. Being self-focused is debilitating.

The church is God's apologetic. When we are obedient to his call to be the family of God, the enemy's tactic of separation and attack is diffused.

But...those kind of friendships will never occur in the big room, in rows, in the hour of worship on the Lord's Day. They won't occur in forced groupings like some spiritual Meetup gathering. There is no secret sauce and despite what the cool church on the other side of town appears to be doing in this area on their website and social media pages, they too have people who just don't feel connected.

This is not an easy fix, but it is something to address.

To those who say "We don't have that issue here" recognize that you're blinded by your own clique. We do. We always have. We likely will continue to as well. Why? Because we are a church full of people.

And everyone, even the one in the mirror, is by default self-focused.

Just remember there is nothing in Scripture that is good that begins with self...you know like self-worth, self-identity, self-focused, self-centered. Well, I take that back. There is one teaching in the Bible that is good and godly that begins with self. It is self-sacrificing.

Isolation is fueled by a meology of self.

CORRUPTION

The writer ends this chapter with more evidence of corruption under the sun.

The preacher speaks highly of the value of a young king coming to the throne. Yet, there are other passages that lament the foolishness of youth and highlight the wisdom of the grey headed. So, what is it? Is the young leader wise or the old leader wise?

It seems that corruption can infect either, regardless of age or experience.

This is a wise saying – better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king.

But...there's more... “who no longer knew how to take advice.”

The lament is upon the corrupt king who has allowed greed to fuel his fate. He has ceased to listen. Thus, he has ceased to learn. Whether a king, a pastor, a CEO, a teacher, a coach, or anyone else with the title leader...once you stop learning, you stop leading.

Regardless if you still hold the title.

Greed leads to corruption. Greed for money, for influence, for power. Greed for what other have.

Oppression, isolation, and corruption are all interlaced.

Yet, there is hope. There is an answer.

The cure for oppression, for isolation, and for corruption is **REDEMPTION**.

That is found only in Christ.

Luke 4:18-19

¹⁸ **“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”** ¹²

¹² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Lk 4:18–19.

Good news – there is an answer. There is hope. There is redemption and new life in Christ. He who is not sequestered under the sun is not infected by the sin found there. He is our redeemer and I know he lives.

Do you?