

Ecclesiastes 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Ecclesiastes chapter 4 And all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbour.

This also is vanity and a striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

Again I saw vanity under the sun. One man 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. Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 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. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?

[1 : 24] And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, Two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king, Who no longer knew how to take advice.

For he went from prison to the throne, Though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. I saw all the living who move about under the sun, Along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place.

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.

Ecclesiastes chapter 4 continues the preacher's exploration of the vaporous character of life, The ways in which it can be transitory and futile. In this chapter the focus is more upon the relationships between human beings and their interactions.

He speaks of oppression and envy, Of sluggishness, of overwork and of isolation, Of the benefits of mutual support, And the vaporous character of status and position.

[2 : 28] In the previous chapter he had spoken about injustice in society. In verses 16 and 17, Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice even there was wickedness, And in the place of righteousness even there was wickedness.

I said in my heart God will judge the righteous and the wicked, For there is a time for every matter and for every work. Considering the reality of oppression, He sees the tears of the oppressed and the power of the oppressors.

And indeed there seems to be no relief in sight. God doesn't seem to be doing anything. No human judge is acting on their behalf. And in such misery and desperation, What hope is there?

The preacher is not sure that it is worth living in those sorts of situations. Indeed the dead who are delivered from such oppression Could be considered fortunate. And indeed more fortunate still Would be those who have never been born into such oppression in the first place.

They've never seen the cruelty of life under the sun. One might perhaps think here of Job's lament and curse upon the day of his birth in Job chapter 3. To make matters worse, Commitment to one's toil seems to exacerbate the situation.

[3 : 37] As if one succeeds in one's work and gains great riches, One only ends up becoming the object of envy for other people, Encouraging their predation. This could be read in two different ways.

Either it is the envy of the person who works that drives him, Or the result of the person who works is envy in other people. Most probably the latter. The character of the sluggard is a familiar one from the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs chapter 6 verses 9 to 11. How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, A little folding of the hands to rest, And poverty will

come upon you like a robber, And want like an armed man.

Chapter 19 verse 24. The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, And will not even bring it back to his mouth. And chapter 20 verse 4. The sluggard does not plough in the autumn, He will seek at harvest and have nothing.

The inactivity of the sluggard's hands Means that he has no food, And he ends up consuming himself. He squanders and devours his own resources, Wastes his patrimony, And ends up losing his capital.

[4 : 46] But there is a problem on the other side. If the sluggard's hands are both inactive, There is also the overworked person, Who has both of his hands full of toil, And enjoys no rest.

Having one hand full of toil is a very good thing, But you need a handful of quietness to go with it. Work needs to be accompanied by rest. A particularly powerful example of this futility Is seen in the person who is isolated, The person who is without friends or companions.

This person toils non-stop, But he's not toiling for anyone else. He has no one to give anything to. And since he's not enjoying rest in his own labour, What is it all for? Relief and reward in toil is found in companionship.

While the preacher's point here would include marriage, It's a far broader point than just marriage. The good companion is a way to avoid the vaporousness Of the situation of verses 7 to 8.

It's also a way by which oppression and loss can be relieved, Because the companion can be a deliverer. The companion also relieves discomfort and hardship. The preacher expresses this by speaking of two people Lying together to keep each other warm, Perhaps on a journey, In the watches of the night, Or in the marriage bed.

[5 : 56] Likewise, the companion is someone who can watch your back, Who can stand by your side and support you, Who can fight with you, And as he stands with you, Together you can withstand whatever opponents come your way.

If two people together is good, Three people together is even better. Knowing and valuing companions is a common theme within wisdom literature. We can think about Proverbs chapter 17 verse 17, A friend loves at all times, And a brother is born for adversity.

Or chapter 18 verse 24, A man of many companions may come to ruin, But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Much of the book of Job is concerned with Job's struggles When his companions have turned against him, And his desire for an advocate or intermediary to stand up for him.

The vaporous character of succession Has already been an issue within the book of Ecclesiastes, In chapter 2 verses 18 to 21, I hated all my toil, In which I toil under the sun, Seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me.

And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool, Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled, And use my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity. So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair Over all the toil of my labors under the sun, Because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill Must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it.

[7 : 21] This also is vanity, And a great evil. Whereas earlier he had spoken about generational succession, Here he speaks about succession on the throne. He presents us with a roughly drawn picture, Which seemed to refer to three different characters.

First of all, there is an old and foolish king. This foolish king does not listen to counsel. And then on the other hand, there's a poor and wise youth. This youth rises from nothing at all, From the prison all of the way to the throne.

This might give us a sense of the transitory character of the glory and power of man, Even of those who enjoy the status and the office of kings. It also suggests that wisdom wins out over folly.

However, there's a twist in the tale. A third character comes along. There is another young upstart, Who's going to stand in the place of the one who rose to the position of the king. Although he gained his position through wisdom, He's going to lose it and be forgotten.

This story does not seem to refer to any specific situation that we know of in scripture. Although it is clearly reminiscent of a couple of major stories in scripture. The story of Joseph, Who rose from the prison to the second in the realm, And then after all of his work for Egypt, Was later forgotten by a pharaoh that rose up.

[8 : 34] It might also remind us of the story of Saul and David. Saul is the old and foolish king, Who won't take advice, Who rejects the lord. And then David rises up to take his place.

He's the wise and faithful youth of humble background. Nevertheless, when Absalom his son rises up against him, All the people flock to Absalom. Despite all of the wisdom of that young man who rose to be king, The people prove to be fickle, And will reject him.

This too is vaporous, And striving after wind. A question to consider, What are some of the ways in which pursuing companionship Might relieve certain of the problems That the preacher has discussed to this point?

