

Listening to the Right Voice

Surviving Evil . . . Under the Sun, Part 1

Ecclesiastes 4:1-8

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

Throughout history, mankind has plotted and schemed and labored in the pursuit of power, applause, material possessions, and some over the centuries would rather be served than to serve. But God through the pen of Solomon desires us to achieve balanced contentment as we live our lives.

Discussion Points:

Oppression is not contained only in history books. Current contemporary world leaders are examples of oppression in action.

- Why does oppression cause such misery? What does Solomon say about this misery?
- In what ways do or should believers live and work differently?
- What comfort and hope does God provide those suffering oppression?

Both ‘Keeping up with the Joneses’ and being a miser were familiar motivators in Solomon’s time. Times have not changed under the sun; these are also well-known motivators in the business world to this day.

- How does the competition to succeed or the determination to have more, do more, sell more, own more, or accomplish more than your competitors shape the cultural workforce currently?
- What is *your* driving motivation in the work force today? Are your motivations breeding contentment or discontentment in your life?
- What implications does this *Ecclesiastes 4:4* hold for the believer?

On the opposite end of the motivation spectrum is arrogant laziness. Instead of working for more and worrying about getting their work done, these workers are lethargic and self-serving.

- What does God say in the scriptures about those who are lazy?
- Why is laziness a motivator?
- Does your work ethic reflect self-serving lethargy or is your reputation one of diligent service? How does this affect your spiritual testimony?

Discussion Guide Cont.

Gospel Connection:

There is something better than these motivations and work force drivers. The believer in Christ not only receives the gift of eternal salvation but also the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit will encourage you to listen to His voice and follow His advice. Whatever God gives you to do, enjoy it with a balanced view and work contentedly at it for His glory. This is superior and worth working toward!

Practical Implications:

Think: Think about what motivates you to work. Are you working for God or for your own goals?

Pray: Praise God for His patience and faithfulness in our lives. Thank Him that He allows us to have balance and contentment in our work.

Do: Enjoy the work that God has given you to do. Pursue His glory in all that He blesses you to do.

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Ecclesiastes 4:1-8

I was given a newspaper clipping by someone in the church about an exercise program for the New Year. I'm not sure why they gave it to me – I'm sure they meant well. I thought this exercise program was pretty amazing, so I wanted to pass the advice along to you:

- Begin by standing on a comfortable surface where you have plenty of room at each side;
- With a 5-lb potato bag in each hand, extend your arms straight out from your sides and hold them there as long as you can.
- Try to reach a full minute, and then relax for a few minutes and then repeat the process 3 more times each day;
- After two weeks, move up to 10-lb potato bags and repeat the exercise steps each day;
- After you feel confident at this level, move up to 25-lb bags and repeat the process;
- After you feel confident at this level, begin putting a potato in each bag.

I love that advice. We can do that.

I couldn't help but think about the fact that there are a great deal of people out there ready to give you advice for just about everything; the only thing is they are not laughing, they are very serious.

We're surrounded by ready advice, primarily on how you can get ahead in life, and, while you are at it, how you can get the most out of life. The more successful they appear to be, the more infallible their advice.

One article caught my eye recently; a network channel put together what they called the pieces of wisdom from a wealthy man I'll not name. His advice is gobbled down by millions of people around the investment globe,

and this network channel put together his best pieces of life advice, including:

- Associate yourself with high-grade people, people you would like to be like. In other words, you might have to dump the friends who are not at the income level you would like to be in because they are going to slow you down or maybe even pull you in the wrong direction, but associate with high-grade people.
- Invest in yourself, which is really nothing more than saying that you are the most important person in your world.
- One more piece of advice that he gives – marry the right person, which is hard to interpret exactly what he means. If you look at what he's done, evidently it doesn't mean to stay with the person you are married to. No, marry the right person means if you are married to the wrong person, then leave her and move in with your girlfriend for 25 years before concluding she's the right person and then marry her, which is what he did.

For people like him to give advice on marriage, friendship, and life is like following the advice of someone telling you how to get stronger by holding empty potato bags. Beloved, one of the most critical things in life is to follow the right advice and to listen to the right voice.

One of richest men on the planet is reaching the end of his life and recognizes he has spent decades following the wrong voice and living the wrong life. He sets the record straight, in many ways, by writing a personal journal of inspired advice for his son, Rehoboam, and for the rest of the world to follow.

Turn with me to the *Book of Ecclesiastes*. Today in our study, we arrive at what Old Testament scholars call the middle part of his journal; chapters 4 through 10 are considered the middle section. You may notice that it sounds very much like Solomon's *Book of Proverbs*, with short paragraphs that cover a lot of territory.ⁱ

This section is a survival guide, in a manner of speaking, to avoiding the pitfalls and dead ends as you navigate the rough water in life. If the first part of his journal dealt with finding meaning under the sun, these next chapters could be entitled, 'surviving evil under the sun'.

Solomon begins by very graphically and realistically describing the world around him, a world that hasn't changed an ounce in 3,000 years. We are in chapter 4 today, where Solomon pulls back the curtain on four different scenes and describes them for us. If you had a program guide for these scenes, the first one would be entitled:

Heartless Oppression: Being on the Wrong Side of Earthly Power

The curtain opens on scene one:

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 (Ecclesiastes 4:1).

This scene is not a comedy; it is reality. Twice Solomon says there was *no one to comfort them* – in other words, there is no escape, no justice, no vindication, no improvement, and no rescue in sight. When he writes that there was no one to comfort them, he means they have "no earthly resource to give them help or relief."ⁱⁱ

This is an intensely emotional entry in Solomon's journal; it is not meant for speed reading. Solomon has seen enough in the world

to categorically call it a world filled with oppressions. He'll use that Hebrew root word for oppression three times in this opening verse. Notice how first he uses it to describe the actions around him – *I saw all the oppressions that are done*. Next he uses it to describe the victims – *and behold the tears of the oppressed* - as if to say they have no recourse other than tears of despair and grief. And then the third time Solomon uses it to describe the culprits – *on the side of their oppressors there was power*.ⁱⁱⁱ So you have oppressions, the oppressed, and the oppressors.

The root word refers to acts of those in power to abuse and to burden others; literally it can refer to trampling and crushing those who are weaker or smaller or poorer or lower in their station in life.^{iv} He doesn't specify who he has in mind. They are simply the ones with more power, and they misuse it to crush other people. The oppressor might be an abusive husband or parent; it can include everyone from a bully at school to the dictator of a country, a sex slaver or abortionist, a gang leader or pimp, an employer in a suit, or a child abuser in secret.

The word for oppression can refer to deprivation of income, land, or personal rights, and it would certainly include persecution for your faith by those in power. You don't have to live very long before you see oppression acted out on the stage of human history.

Because of their sin, Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden in *Genesis chapter 3* and eight verses later their family is ripped apart when one of their sons kills his brother in a rage of envy.

The corruption of the human heart seems to defy description. A few days ago a teenage boy driving his pickup truck passed an elderly man minding his own business walking down the street on his cane; this young man made a U-turn and ran over that man, crushing him to death. After he was caught and later interviewed he said he just wanted to know what it would feel like to kill someone. Follow the news - our world is filled with oppression.

At this point you might expect Solomon to repeat his statement of faith and trust which he delivered in *chapter 3* where he reminded us that God is going to make everything right one day in His courtroom of holy justice. Instead, Solomon delivers what you might expect from people who can't see any higher than the sun – notice *verse 2*:

And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun (Ecclesiastes 4:2-3).

You might come to the conclusion, like Solomon in his observation, that it is better to be dead than alive. And tragically, 130 people in our country alone will make the decision to take their own life on any given day. One of the troubling trends in our world today is the increasing rate of suicide. But Solomon isn't recommending suicide. He is actually saying that it would be better to not even have been born than have to suffer on the wrong side of abusive power; it would be better to not have been born than have to suffer tears of hopelessness in this heartless, destructive, corrupting, dangerous, selfish, painful world.

By the way, this is the perspective of someone stuck down here under the sun without any comfort in belonging to the God of all comfort, our Lord. Twice Solomon writes they are without comfort. The word for *comfort* is the same Hebrew word Solomon's father used in *Psalms 23* to tell us that our comfort comes from our Good Shepherd's rod and staff, references to His word and His personal presence and sovereign care. Our ultimate source of comfort is not down here under the sun, but from the Creator of the sun. Like the believer I read about recently living in a Muslim majority world where now she has been disowned and put out by her for having believed the gospel. She wrote, "My life was in constant

danger but instead of despairing I am finding comfort in God's word and God's presence . . . in belonging to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."^v

David the Psalmist prays in poetry, in *Psalms 119*, what Solomon no doubt heard many times growing up:

*They draw near who persecute me with evil purpose
But you are near, O Lord
All my ways are before you.
I rise before dawn and cry for help;
I hope in your word;*

Envious Rivalry: Keeping up with the Joneses

The second scene Solomon describes is equally widespread; we'll call scene two "Envious Rivalry", and we will subtitle it "Keeping up with the Joneses".

Notice *verse 4*:

Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work (success in work) ***come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind*** (Ecclesiastes 4:4).

Solomon is speaking in general terms and yet, at the same time, he is telling things we might not care to hear it. He is essentially saying here that one of the driving motivations in the work force today is competition to succeed, and success is determined by having more, doing more, selling more, owning more, accomplishing more than your competitors. That is why they are called competitors.

A professor at Harvard Business School wrote about a disturbing trend in business that he calls "comparison obsession." He writes that a former student of his who graduated ten years ago with a terrific job at a Fortune 500 company suffers with comparison obsession. At least it seemed like a terrific job until she received her alumni newsletter and learned that a fellow

alumnus who was in the MBA program with her had just been named Vice President at their company. From that moment on she could barely hold a conversation without bemoaning her lack of promotion.

This professor goes on to write that business executives, Wall Street analysts, lawyers, doctors and other professionals are equally obsessed with comparing their own achievements against those of others in their profession. He concludes, people are increasingly trapped by their comparison [obsession].^{vi}

Solomon calls it something less sophisticated; he calls it sin. Envy. Covetousness. Comparison obsession is sinful envy. We envy the success of others rather than enjoying our own. This sinful desire means that we don't just want to get ahead in life, we want to get ahead of everybody else.^{vii}

We live in a world filled with Joneses who are trying to keep up with the other Joneses. My apologies if your last name is Jones. This is not about you - entirely. The truth is everybody's last name is affected because everybody is infected with sin. Even those of us in the world of church leadership. When I travel I have people all the time ask me, "How many people are attending Colonial?" Why is it that I'm tempted to give them the attendance from Easter Sunday or Christmas Sunday when they all came back? Pastors are infected too.

One pastor wrote recently that he was sitting his living room on Sunday afternoon with his little six-year-old boy. His son, just out of the blue, asked, "Daddy, when you sit up there on the platform, just before you get up to preach, you just sit there and bow your head. What are you doing?"

His father answered, "I'm asking the Lord to give me a good sermon."

His son replied, "Well, then why doesn't He?"^{viii}

Go to your room.

It is easy to forget sin of envy, even in the assembly of a local church, or, as A.W. Tozer

put it, we forget the lesson that as Christians we are not competitors, we are co-workers.^{ix}

Solomon paints the picture of someone trying to pass everybody else in the rat race of life motivated by rivalry and competition. And with that, Solomon abruptly reverses the scene from envious rivalry to a scene of arrogant laziness.

Arrogant Laziness: Resigning from the Rat Race

Notice *verse 5*:

The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh (Ecclesiastes 4:5).

That sounds gross, doesn't it?

A fool folds his hands. Keep in mind a fool in the Bible is not somebody who flunked 3rd grade. A fool is an arrogant person absorbed with himself. So here is someone who thinks they are better than those people in the rat race; they are better than people who are in a hurry, so they choose to do as little as possible.

By the way, this doesn't mean they are unemployed. You probably work with some of them. Nothing about their work inspires them or fires up their imagination. They're lethargic. They clock in and clock out. They're killing time.^x

Solomon says what they are really doing is effectively wasting their lives and, really more than that, destroying their reputation, work ethic, and testimony. They expect others to pull their weight, do the chores, and finish the tough assignments while they essentially expect to be served as they fold their hands, do as little as possible, and wait for the weekend. They are not about to over-compete, but they end up underperforming, and neither one is a biblical work ethic to pursue.^{xi}

Blind Ambition: Imitating Ebenezer Scrooge

Solomon now describes a scene we will call "Blind Ambition".

Notice *verse 7*:

Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil (Ecclesiastes 4:7-8a).

Now get this – Solomon describes a man who does not have an heir, does not have a family, and does not have an extended family to whom he can leave his wealth. The implication is that he does not want a family anyway because they will just get in the way of his materialism and money.

Notice further:

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 (Ecclesiastes 4:8b).

You could subtitle this scene “Imitating Ebenezer Scrooge”. What Solomon does here is describe a miser. His only friends are his money and his work. He doesn’t need anybody, and he doesn’t want anybody anyway. Here is a guy with his nose buried in his ledger with no end in sight to his toil and no satisfaction coming either.

Solomon informs us that this person never stops to ask the obvious questions, “What am I doing for somebody besides myself?” Or “Why are my riches only driving me to want more?”^{xii}

I am not enjoying anything; all I want is more. Solomon has pegged the human race perfectly, hasn’t he?

These four scenes describe four possibilities of listening to the wrong voice and following the wrong advice.

- Some pursue power, but then misuse it.
- Others work hard but the hidden motive in their heart is to be applauded or get an edge past their competition.
- Others decide to just get by; they fold their hands in self-centered arrogance

and demand to be served rather than serve.

- And others never take a breath. They never stop churning away and counting their coins or their trophies or their toys, and they never seem to notice that everyone has slipped away and left them in their self-absorbed world all alone.

Proverb of Balance

Tucked away in the middle of these four scenes is a wise proverb from the Spirit of God.

Notice back in *verse 6*:

Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind (Ecclesiastes 4:6).

Solomon is describing someone with balance. His hands are not folded and idle. He isn’t trying to stuff more into both hands. He hasn’t given up on working with one of his hands, but his hand is filled with quietness. “Quietness is a word that serves as a synonym for contentment.”^{xiii}

Solomon is describing balanced, wise contentment that is able to say, “I’ve got one handful. God has given me just enough.”

Grasping and greed and envy and competition and power – all described here in this text are all alike in that they will never say, “I’ve got enough!” They will never count up what they have. They will always count up what they want but do not have.

Solomon is telling us something is better than all of that. Did you notice how the proverb began - “Here’s something **better**” – circle that word. This is superior. This is worth pursuing. Listen to this voice; follow this advice. And if you listen to this voice, which is the advice of God’s Spirit, it will invite you to trust what God has put into your hand, just enough. Now use it, enjoy it, and work at it, ultimately for His glory.

I can’t think of a more powerful testimony of contentment in more recent times than from an

eight-year-old girl who had every reason to spend her life complaining for what had been essentially taken from her. When she was six weeks old she caught a cold. The family physician was away at the time and a country doctor was recommended to see her in passing. Turns out he wasn't a doctor after all, but he pretended well enough. He prescribed hot mustard poultices to be applied to her eyelids which had become swollen with a rash. The infection cleared up eventually, but the treatment scarred her eyes, and it wasn't long after that her parents realized she had lost her sight. That country doctor had since left town in a hurry and was never heard of again.

When this young girl was five-years-old, friends and neighbors collected enough money to send her to an eye specialist for treatment. Even though she was five at the time, she never forgot hearing the doctor tell her, "Poor child – I am afraid you will never see again."^{xiv}

But that wasn't her attitude at all. She committed her life to Christ and among other things, turned to poetry to express her confidence and contentment in Christ. It wasn't

long before Fanny Crosby wrote her first poem. And this poem has a way, as it came back to my mind – of convicting and confronting a world engulfed in power, prestige, rivalry, envy, lazy arrogance, and selfish pursuit of more of this and more of that and more and more and more. She seemed to understand this proverb of wise balance at a very young age. God had filled her hand with something – it wasn't much – but it was something she could be diligent at, something she could develop and use to bless others and ultimately glorify God.

Her first poem, written when she was eight years old sort of underscored her simple yet determined testimony of following after godly contentment. It goes like this:

How many blessings I enjoy
That other people don't!
So weep or sigh because I'm blind,
I cannot, and I won't.
Oh, what a happy child I am,
Although I cannot see!
I am resolved that in this world
Contented I will be.^{xv}

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/12/2020 by Stephen Davey.

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i Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (IVP Academic, 2009), p. 104

ii Ibid, p. 106

iii David A. Hubbard, *The Preacher's Commentary: Volume 16* (Thomas Nelson, 1991), p. 118

iv R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer & Bruce Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament: Volume 2* (Moody Press, 1980), p. 705

v Adapted from Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters* (Crossway, 2010), p. 108

vi <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/july/2071111.html>

vii Ryken, p. 110

viii Terry Powell, *Serve Strong* (Leafwood Publishers, 2014), p. 17

ix Quoted in *The Next Chapter After the Last*, Christianity Today, Vol. 32, no. 13

x Ed Young, *Been There. Done That. Now What?* (Broadman and Holman, 1994), p. 102

xi Adapted from David Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth* (Integrity, 2004), p. 88

xii Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge* (Insight For Living, 1986), p. 39

xiii Ryken, p. 111

xiv www.earnestlycontending.com/KT/bios/fannycrosby.html

xv Warren W. Wiersbe, 50 People Every Christian Should Know (Baker Books, 2009), p. 102