

OPPRESSED, LONELY,
FORGOTTEN
ECCLESIASTES 4



A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

T . M . M O O R E

The Fellowship of Ailbe

Oppressed, Lonely, Forgotten
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Ecclesiastes 4: Introduction

It is vain and foolish to devote so much time and energy to work and its rewards, and to neglect relationships with others.

The world is filled with people who are oppressed by those who care for nothing but their own interests. Covetousness more than care prevails between neighbors. Lonely people abound, who, though they have all worldly comforts, find little lasting satisfaction in things. We need others in our lives. We are made for friendships and community. We must learn to think about others, and not just about ourselves. The investment we make in others will have lasting effects, whereas, when we live only for ourselves, we leave nothing for anyone to remember us by.

These are some of the thoughts Solomon puts before his son, Rehoboam, as he seeks to woo him from his “under the sun” path back to an “under heaven” approach to life. It was too late for Rehoboam; we must not let it be too late for us.

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We hope you find this study of Ecclesiastes a challenging and stretching experience of journeying more deeply into the Word of God. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Oppression Everywhere

Pray Psalm 72:18, 19.

Blessed *be* the LORD God, the God of Israel,
Who only does wondrous things!
And blessed *be* His glorious name forever!
And let the whole earth be filled *with* His glory.
Amen and Amen.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:1.

Prepare.

1. What are some examples of “oppression” in the world today? How does living “under the sun” encourage oppression?
2. The oppressed have “no comforter”, or, no one to encourage and support them. Do Christians have such a Comforter?

Meditate.

The end of chapter 3 provides a bridge to this next section of Solomon’s counsel to his son, in which he muses on the wrong that seems everywhere to exist “under the sun”.

The word “oppressions” can be translated “frauds” or “wrongs”, and these are perhaps more germane in our day than “oppressions” (depending, of course, on where one lives). People take advantage of one another, Solomon insists, when their only frame of reference is the temporal/material horizon of experience. Here there are no abiding values or ethical principles to keep men from doing as much as they can get away with to aggrandize their own wellbeing at the expense of anyone and everyone. Those who have power wield it for their own ends, while those who do not find themselves on the short end of the stick, with no one to comfort them. It is a story repeated in all too many ways throughout the course of human history.

Having established his *theme*, Solomon now turns to unpack his most important *lesson*: Life is nothing to rejoice over if you choose to live it apart from God.

The next section of his counsel, chapters 4-6, will explore this lesson from various angles, at the same time keeping touch with the main theme of the book, albeit in a *soto voce* manner. Solomon begins this section with a broad generalization, not unlike the way he began each of the preceding sections. We are meant to understand that “oppression” of various kinds – or frauds and wrongdoings – will be the focus of this next part of Solomon’s exhortation.

Having held up a vision of what life can be, Solomon now brings his son down to the realities of everyday life. Solomon has his head in the heavenlies even as he unpacks the troubles of the temporal realm. And that itself is good counsel.

Reflect.

1. What kinds of “power” leads to people being oppressed?
2. Is it possible to be oppressed by *spiritual* powers? How does God equip us to deal with these “under heaven”?

3. What does it feel like to be oppressed? Should we be concerned for the oppressed peoples around us? Explain.

*All things that are have already been, and “nothing is new under the sun,” but “all is vanity. Therefore I hated the whole of this life,” said Ecclesiastes. He who hated his life certainly commended death. And so he praised the dead rather than the living and judged him happy that did not come into this life nor take up this vain toil. Ambrose of Milan (333-397), *Death as a Good*, 7.28*

People need the comfort of Your love, O Lord, and You have appointed me to give it. Help me today to reach out to...

Pray Psalm 72.1-4.

Pray that the Lord will have mercy on oppressed and poor people everywhere, and commit yourself to be a source of comfort and encouragement to others today.

Sing Psalm 72.1-4.

Psalm 72.1-4 (*Martyrdom: Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed*)

O give the King Your judgment, Lord, and righteousness Your Son.

And let Him judge by Your good Word the need of everyone.

Let now the mountains ring with peace, the hills in righteousness.

Let justice rise, oppression cease, and all the needy bless.

2 Better Dead or Unborn?

Pray Psalm 72:12-14.

For He will deliver the needy when he cries,
The poor also, and him who has no helper.
He will spare the poor and needy,
And will save the souls of the needy.
He will redeem their life from oppression and violence;
And precious shall be their blood in His sight.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:2, 3.

Prepare.

1. Do you think Solomon is serious about what he says here? Why or why not?
2. Do some people look at life this way? Explain.

Meditate.

This bit of hyperbole should not be taken literally; after all, Solomon wants to hold out the hope that even those trapped in an “under the sun” existence can find their way back to God, just as he had.

But his point is clear: life under the sun, from a merely “secular” perspective, is filled with pain and sorrow, so much so that one is better off dead or never having been born. We see this same sentiment expressed in our own day, for example, in young parents who determine not to have children because they don’t want to bring a child into this hard, evil world. Those who commit suicide or turn to euthanasia in one form or another also testify of their belief in what Solomon here asserts: I’m better off dead.

For many people, hopelessness and despair are the logical outcomes of believing that there are no eternal verities and no absolute truths or values by which to live. Happily, while some philosophers may trumpet such ideas, most people choose to live as if something else were true, as if life really does matter, even if they can’t explain why they do. Made in the image of God, they can do no other (Rom. 1:18-32; 2:14, 15).

The French existentialist Albert Camus represented this view of life. Life is absurd, Camus insisted. It makes no sense, has no purpose, and isn’t worth living. Nevertheless, men must fight against absurdity, as if they and their lives really mattered. The story of Sisyphus, condemned to roll a huge boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back down on him each time, was the commanding myth for Camus. His view is echoed in scientific naturalism and postmodern theory.

The Christian worldview exposes the inconsistency of those who claim that there is no purpose to life but then live as if there really is one; and the Christian is able to explain both why people live this way, and how they may know life as it is meant to be “under heaven”.

Reflect.

1. What sorts of things cause people to despair of life?
2. How does the Christian message offer hope to those who are living “under the sun”?

3. What would you say to someone who insisted that life is absurd, has no meaning or purpose, but we still have to soldier on nonetheless?

He complained that he had seen deceit beneath the sun because he knew that above the sun there is a just judge "who dwells on high and looks down upon humble things." Above the sun there are dwelling places in which the righteous receive due rewards for their righteousness. The Venerable Bede (672-735), Commentary on 2 Peter 3.13

Help me to live a full and meaningful life today, Lord, to show that life really is worth living, especially as I...

Pray Psalm 72.1-8.

Thank the Lord for the many ways His sovereignty over creation reminds us that life is beautiful, good, and full of meaning.

Sing Psalm 72.1-8.

Psalm 72.1-8 (*Martyrdom: Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed*)

O give the King Your judgment, Lord, and righteousness Your Son.
And let Him judge by Your good Word the need of everyone.

Let now the mountains ring with peace, the hills in righteousness.
Let justice rise, oppression cease, and all the needy bless.

Let nations fear You while the sun and moon endure on high.
Refresh, renew us, every one, like sweet rain falling from the sky.

Let righteousness abundant be where Jesus' reign endures.
Let peace increase from sea to sea 'til moonlight shall be no more.

3 The People Next Door

Pray Psalm 72:17.

His name shall endure forever;
His name shall continue as long as the sun.
And *men* shall be blessed in Him;
All nations shall call Him blessed.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:4.

Prepare.

1. To what does successful toil often lead?
2. What does this say about life “under the sun”?

Meditate.

Why do people “under the sun” go to work? Partly, we suspect, to find some meaning for their lives. But seasons of recession and hard times remind us that for most people, work is primarily a way of making a living so that they can possess the good things of life.

But then, what standards do people employ for determining how much stuff will make them happy? They look at the people next door. “Keeping up with the Joneses” is a way of life for many people – the Joneses being anyone who has a little more than they do. We have to own all the latest gadgets, or to live in just the right neighborhood and drive only the best cars if we want to be happy. We need more of this and that and everything else – just like the people with whom we associate – or we’ll be seen to be less than successful, less than happy. But someone will always have more, and we’ll always have more than someone else.

Thus we live in a kind of perpetual adolescence. Without eternal standards of value, we get our values from one another and from the temper of the times. And in our day, the primary value seems to be that of “more stuff”. That, too, is vanity and striving after the wind.

The deeper we get into Solomon’s meditations, the more contemporary and relevant they become. People stuck in the effects of the fall, and living “under the sun”, are not what they think they are. Because they are made in the image of God, though they deny this, something in them longs for meaning, happiness, fulfillment, and purpose. But everything about their environment discourages them from thinking they may know these in anything other than merely relativistic terms.

This verse is a kind of “section sub-heading” to the theme opened in verse 1. Solomon will follow this general statement about the vanity of comparing ourselves with others with additional thoughts about relationships – what they should be and what they actually are “under the sun”.

His point is clear, although subtle: You have to deal with people, even “under the sun”, but you have to be careful. How will you do this?

Reflect.

1. What is covetousness? In what sense is it true that covetousness is the gateway to all sin?
2. Can I love people whom I envy? Whose prosperity I covet? How can we guard ourselves against

covetousness?

3. Why is covetousness “vanity and grasping for the wind”?

Among acquaintances, neighbors and fellow workmen, or those who are otherwise brought into close contact, are envied, and among these again, those of the same age and kinsmen and brothers. In short, as the red blight is a common pest to corn, so envy is the plague of friendship. Basil the Great (330-379), *Homily Concerning Envy*

Guard me against envy and covetousness, Lord, so that I may love my neighbor and...

Pray Psalm 72.15-17.

Praise the Lord, Who owns the wealth of the world, and thank Him for all that He has entrusted to you.

Sing Psalm 72.15-17.

Psalm 72.15-17 (*Martyrdom: Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed*)

Let Christ be praised and all the gold of Sheba be His right.

Let blessings to His Name be told, and prayers made both day and night.

And let the earth abound with grain, let fields His fame proclaim.

And may our King forever reign, and nations bless His great Name.

4 Consumed and Consuming

Pray Psalm 72.5-7.

They shall fear You
As long as the sun and moon endure,
Throughout all generations.
He shall come down like rain upon the grass before mowing,
Like showers *that* water the earth.
In His days the righteous shall flourish,
And abundance of peace,
Until the moon is no more.

Read Ecclesiastes 4.5, 6.

Prepare.

1. Who is the fool? Why?
2. What do we need in addition to work? Why?

Meditate.

So how should we respond to the absurdity of life? The fool will say, “Well, what’s the use? *Qué será, será.* I’m not gonna exert myself for any purpose or person.”

So he just wastes away, feeding off his own selfish interests and aspiring to nothing greater than whatever is immediately at hand (v. 5).

On the other hand, the diligent man gets busy with as many projects and activities as he can keep going at once. He is so busy – “both hands full...with toil” (v. 6) – that, while he embodies the idea that life and happiness consist in things and experiences, he has no time to enjoy them, and dies exhausted and defeated.

Solomon slips in a glimpse of life “under heaven” by the phrase “handful *with* quietness (rest)”. In the divine economy men need to work – it is the gift of God – but they also need to rest, and they can only truly rest when they live toward God rather than toward themselves. God not only authorizes rest, but commands it as vital to full and abundant life. Solomon’s glance at the fourth commandment here is his way of keeping his primary theme in view.

Doubtless we can think of examples of the three types of people Solomon mentions here: Ne’re-dowells and sluggards, workaholics and manic-depressives, and those who manage to know true contentment amid the trials and troubles of life. Solomon’s ability to speak in generalities that transcend time and place is a measure of the wisdom God gave him for ruling well. He shows us, like Augustine in *City of God*, that the two perspectives – under the heavens and under the sun – intermingle and intertwine in all human experience.

The challenge to the redeemed of the Lord, who are working for restoration and renewal in this life, is to maximize their experience “under heaven” and to beware of and avoid every tendency to give in to the temptations of life “under the sun”.

Reflect.

1. The fool consumes himself by focusing only on himself. Why is this folly?
2. Why is that some people, who are so busy and productive, are often neither very happy nor fulfilled? What do they lack?
3. Why is rest such an important aspect of life “under heaven”?

“The fool folds his hands together and eats his own flesh,” that is, he becomes involved in the concerns of the body and eats his own flesh, just as does all-powerful death. And such a one will not find eternal life. But the wise person who lifts up his works that they may shine before his Father who is in heaven has not consumed his flesh; instead, he has raised it to the grace of the resurrection. Ambrose of Milan (333-397), Letter 28, to Bishop Sabinus

Let my work be for Your glory, Lord, and my rest be for my refreshing as I...

Pray Psalm 72.1-8.

How will the Lord bring His peace, justice, salvation, and righteousness to your Personal Mission Field today?

Sing Psalm 72.1-8.

Psalm 72.1-8 (*Martyrdom: Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed*)

O give the King Your judgment, Lord, and righteousness Your Son.
And let Him judge by Your good Word the need of everyone.

Let now the mountains ring with peace, the hills in righteousness.
Let justice rise, oppression cease, and all the needy bless.

Let nations fear You while the sun and moon endure on high.
Refresh, renew us, every one, like sweet rain falling from the sky.

Let righteousness abundant be where Jesus’ reign endures;
Let peace increase from sea to sea ‘til moonlight shall be no more.

5 Too Busy for People

Pray Psalm 72.12-14.

For He will deliver the needy when he cries,
The poor also, and *him* who has no helper.
He will spare the poor and needy,
And will save the souls of the needy.
He will redeem their life from oppression and violence;
And precious shall be their blood in His sight.

Read Ecclesiastes 4.7, 8.

Prepare.

1. What does Solomon mean by “vanity under the sun”? To what does this refer in our passage?
2. Why is the man presented here a fool?

Meditate.

Solomon presents the case of a man who has missed a fundamental component of human experience. He has no one whom he needs to support by his work, and yet he works like a dog, so that he can satisfy all his lusts; yet his work isn't pleasurable. He is a slave to his passions (his “eye”), and he works to satisfy them; but he can never find in material success what he is missing in human relationships.

He's so busy trying to satisfy his lusts that he doesn't even stop to consider that perhaps he's looking for meaning and purpose in life in the wrong place. He doesn't have to work so hard, having no one else to support. And working like he does doesn't satisfy what he really needs – which he might find in meaningful relationships, if he were so inclined. He's trapped in the getting-and-spending lifestyle and the bumper sticker on his chariot asks, “Are we having fun yet?”

“Under the sun”, men's inner needs drive them, but their limited perception hijacks their efforts to meet those needs into one dead-end after another.

These two verses bridge to the next part of this sub-section on relationships. He's been talking about man alone, but he is moving to a section on relationships. So he sets it up by showing this man who's so busy working to satisfy his cravings that he can't even think about relating to others.

These days we hear complaints that the world is becoming an increasingly impersonal place. Everyone has a number; phones are answered digitally; politicians troll for votes with recorded messages; neighbors cocoon in their homes; no one seems to know my name.

Our modern/postmodern world can seem too busy for meaningful relationships, and, as Solomon asserts, this too is vanity and an unhappy business.

Reflect.

1. What does Solomon consider to be more important, things or people? Explain.
2. There is no doubt that work can satisfy many of our needs and wants. But it cannot satisfy them

all, especially the most important needs. Explain.

3. It seems like Solomon is trying to provoke Rehoboam to a little introspection. How do you see that? Why is that a good idea when we're trying to explain life "under heaven"?

A selfish man cares for nobody; there is none to take care of but himself, yet he will scarcely allow necessary rest to himself, and the people he employs. He never thinks he has enough. Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 4.7, 8

Lord, do not let me overlook the people to whom You are sending me today, but let me...

Pray Psalm 72.9-14.

As Jesus – the Righteous One – increases and enlarges His rule in your Personal Mission Field, how should that impact the people around you? Pray about how you should seek Christ's Kingdom and rule in your life today.

Sing Psalm 72.9-14.

Psalm 72.9-14 (*Martyrdom: Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed*)

And let the Righteous rule the earth, and let His foes bow low.

Let nations praise His matchless worth, and all His bidding do.

The Lord the needy rescues when he cries to Him for grace.

All they who suffer violence find mercy before His face.

6 The Value of Relationships

Pray Psalm 72.17, 18.

His name shall endure forever;
His name shall continue as long as the sun.
And *men* shall be blessed in Him;
All nations shall call Him blessed.
Blessed *be* the LORD God, the God of Israel,
Who only does wondrous things!

Read Ecclesiastes 4.9-12.

Prepare.

1. What does Solomon say about relationships in these verses?
2. Which does Solomon consider more important: relationships, or acquiring things? Explain.

Meditate.

There is more to life than getting-and-spending. Here Solomon inserts another truth from his “under heaven” perspective, one that even hard-headed Rehoboam could acknowledge as simple common sense: Everybody needs other people; we can’t just think about ourselves or consume all our time and energy trying to accumulate things and advantages.

Implied in this, of course, is the idea that we should choose our friends wisely and not surround ourselves with fools or gluttons (vv. 4-7). This will be Rehoboam’s downfall (1 Kgs. 12.1-17). Because so many advantages come from meaningful relationships, it is important that we work hard to nurture and sustain them. Life is more than things, and human beings are more than consumers. God made us for community, and we need to work hard at making this part of life work.

The common-sense appeal of this verse anticipates later sections (chs. 7, 10, 11), in which Solomon will again appeal to common sense in order to expose the folly toward which Rehoboam is inclined. The section that follows this (4.13-16) will build on the advice of this section in an effort to point Rehoboam to finding wise friends.

Although Ecclesiastes can seem to ramble in a fairly unstructured way, when we slow down and study the links Solomon builds into his argument, we can see the wisdom of his style. Solomon warns and exhorts even as he provokes and reminds, all the while building his argument from experiences of everyday reality to the conclusion that life only makes sense when it is wholly devoted to God.

Reflect.

1. How does our being made for community reflect the being and character of God?
2. Solomon mentions only a few of the benefits of strong relationships. What others can you cite?
3. What would you say are the keys to building and maintaining strong relationships?

Human frailty quickly falls if it proudly relies on itself, despises companions and is unwilling to have a colleague. As Scripture says, “Woe to him that is alone, for when he falls, he has none to lift him up.” Peter Chrysologus (380-

450), *Sermon 170*

I need to work on my relationships, Lord, to strengthen them in Jesus. Help me today as I...

Pray Psalm 72.16-20.

Praise God for the friends, loved ones, colleagues, and mentors He has put in your life, and seek His help in showing more love to each of them.

Sing Psalm 72.16-20.

Psalm 72.16-20 (*Martyrdom: Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed*)

And let the earth abound with grain, let fields His fame proclaim.

And may our King forever reign and nations bless His great Name.

Now bless the God of Israel, Who wondrous works performs.

And bless His Name, His glory tell both now and forever more!

7 Short Memories

Pray Psalm 72.1, 2.

Give the king Your judgments, O God,
And Your righteousness to the king's Son.
He will judge Your people with righteousness,
And Your poor with justice.

Read Ecclesiastes 4.13-16.

Review Ecclesiastes 4.

Prepare.

1. Who was the “old and foolish king”?
2. Who was the “wise youth”, and who was the “second youth”?

Meditate.

These verses have a hint of nostalgia to them. Is Solomon reflecting obliquely on his own experience? Is he thinking back to his days of youthful wisdom, perhaps even trying to relive them? Solomon was “born poor” because he was not David’s first-born; others were ahead of him in line for the throne. He fully tried life “under the sun”, and he found it to be vanity. It seems he had been “admonished” in his old age, and was now taking his own advice, learned through the school of hard knocks.

But what about Rehoboam? Would he be a foolish youth? Or would he be wise like his father was, and had become once again? Solomon seems to fear that he would not be remembered fondly (v. 16). If he, who had been so wise, would be quickly forgotten, for what could Rehoboam hope, if he followed the way of vanity?

There is in these verses the suggestion of an important Biblical theme, which is easily overlooked. That is the importance of living for the generations, and not just for the moment. We heard this theme in 1.11 and 2.16, and it echoes in other portions of Scripture (cf. Ps. 45.17; Ps. 78.1-8; 2 Tim. 2.2). We cannot know fullness of life by living only for ourselves in the moment.

Yet living for the moment is the only hope they can have, who choose to live “under the sun”. They know they’ll probably never have a page in any history book, so they try to “grab for all the gusto” they can, since they “only go around once in life”. Sadly, many who, like Rehoboam, profess to know God, are living this way as well.

This is not how God intends His redeemed people to think or live. We are part of the past and we contribute to the future. Only by living in the wisdom of God can we make a lasting contribution of good for the generations to come. Good associations and a proper orientation to life in the present, conducted to the glory of God, will help to ensure that our legacy remains, and leads many to give thanks to God.

Reflect.

1. What kinds of things can distract us from seeking the wisdom of God? How can we resist these distractions?

2. What does it mean to live for the generations to come? Why should every Christian live this way?

3. Just as a king like Rehoboam had many people in his sphere of influence, so each of us does as well. How should we work our Personal Mission Field, so that wisdom, rather than vanity, increases there?

Princes see themselves slighted by those they have studied to oblige; this is vanity and vexation of spirit. But the willing servants of the Lord Jesus, our King, rejoice in him alone, and they will love Him more and more to all eternity.
Matthew Henry (1662-1714), *Commentary on Ecclesiastes 4*

Lord, help me to work each day on my legacy for Your glory, so that I honor You as I...

Pray Psalm 72.1-20.

David's psalm (v. 20) was written for Solomon (superscription), to help him in seeking the Kingdom of God. We are all rulers in God's Kingdom (1 Pet. 2.9, 10), and we are called to exercise God's judgment over all things (1 Cor. 2.12-16). Pray for Kingdom wisdom to guide you today, and to make you a blessing to all the people you meet.

Sing Psalm 72.1-20.

Psalm 72.1-20 (*Martyrdom: Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed*)

O give the King Your judgment, Lord, and righteousness Your Son.
And let Him judge by Your good Word the need of everyone.

Let now the mountains ring with peace, the hills in righteousness.
Let justice rise, oppression cease, and all the needy bless.

Let nations fear You while the sun and moon endure on high.
Refresh, renew us, every one, like sweet rain falling from the sky.

Let righteousness abundant be where Jesus' reign endures.
Let peace increase from sea to sea 'til moonlight shall be no more.

And let the Righteous rule the earth, and let His foes bow low.
Let nations praise His matchless worth, and all His bidding do.

The Lord the needy rescues when he cries to Him for grace.
All they who suffer violence find mercy before His face.

Let Christ be praised, and all the gold of Sheba be His right.
Let blessings to His Name be told, and prayers made both day and night.

And let the earth abound with grain, let fields His fame proclaim.
And may our King forever reign and nations bless His great Name.

Now bless the God of Israel, Who wondrous works performs.
And bless His Name, His glory tell both now and forever more!

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Why are relationships so important in the life of faith? How can we benefit from working hard to maintain good relationships?
2. How can we resist the temptation to think that things and success are more important than relationships?
3. What does Solomon seem most to have regretted about his past life?
4. What was he most hoping for his son, to whom Ecclesiastes is addressed?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this chapter? How are you putting that lesson to work in your Personal Mission Field?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.