

Ecclesiastes 4 - Two ways to live

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[0:00] Great, let me pray as we come to God's word. Let me pray. Father, we do thank you for your goodness to us. We thank you for your word. We want to thank you that we're not scrabbling around in the dark tonight trying to work out what it is that you might think, but that we can open your word and read for ourselves what it is that you have to say to us.

So bless our time together. We thank you again that Louise is here. We thank you for our brothers and sisters at Hope Church West End. We pray that he might be the blessing to them that he has been and continues to be to us and that you'd be with him and Chris and Laura especially. So bless our time together now around your word we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Okay, let me read Ecclesiastes 4 for us. Ecclesiastes 4. It's on the front of your handout and if you don't want to turn it up in the Bible or it's on page 672 if you want to see it in its wider surroundings. Again I looked and... Sorry. Right, let me try again. Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun.

I saw the tears of the oppressed, that they have no comforter. Power is on the side of their oppressors and they have no comforter. And I declared that the dead who had already died are happier than the living who are still alive.

[1:30] But better than both is the one who has never been born, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun. And I saw that all the toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another.

This too is meaningless, chasing after the wind. Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

Again I saw something meaningless under the sun. There was a man all alone. He had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.

For whom am I toiling? he asked. And why am I depriving myself of enjoyment? This too is meaningless. A miserable business. Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor.

If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity the one who falls and has no one to help them up. Also if two lie down together, they will keep warm.

[2:41] But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning.

The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor.

There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came after were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless. A chasing after the wind.

Amen. In his book called *Destiny*, or *Living Life Backwards* as it's now called, which we have been following in this series. I say following because that sounds better than copying, doesn't it?

But there's an overlap between those two in this Ecclesiastes series. David Gibson divides chapter 4 into two halves around verses 6 and 7.

[3:52] I think it's probably an oversimplification. I'm sure he would say that too. But it is a helpful one, and so we're going to try and follow that division of the passage this evening. He argues, persuasively I think as well, that the theme of the chapter is about living life for and with others, not just yourself.

It is the kind of myth of the moment, and it seems to have been the myth of the moment of the writer of Ecclesiastes as well, that life is essentially all about me. It's all about us.

When we imagine the movie of our lives, we are the central character. Everyone else's role is played in relation to ours. Even when perhaps in our lowest moments we imagine ourselves passing away, we imagine what everybody else is thinking about us afterwards, because we find ourselves at the very center of our own lives and thinking it's all about me.

But that says Ecclesiastes 4 is not actually correct. But more than just saying it's not correct, Ecclesiastes 4 wants to tell you that's actually not a very happy way to live your life.

It is the source of misery. And what we see in the first six verses really, what happens to you when you hate others? And the second half is really what happens to you when you love others.

[5:13] And so the first half, and these are Dave Gibson's headings, if you hate your neighbor, you will destroy yourself, is the first six verses. So let's talk about those first.

Hate your neighbor and destroy yourself. I don't think there can be any doubt of the truth of verses 1 to 3, of the horror and injustice that is in our world is very difficult to look at.

I saw the tears of the oppressed. They had no comforter. Power was on the side of their oppressors, and they had no comforter. No comforter. No comforter.

There's no positive spin on this. Now, I don't have to really give you many examples. I'm sure you can think of all of your own only too quickly, and many of you here have had front row seats to the injustice and horrors yourselves.

Sexual abuse. Torture of children. The sort of mindless trivialization of life by the gangs around us that coach teenagers and younger people even to carry knives with them.

[6:15] The senseless wickedness of a power-hungry dictator. The brutality of war and the death of innocent people caught up in it. Through no fault of their own. The trafficking of young women to work in the sex trade.

The truth is, if you think of any of these things for too long, then you will end up with the writer saying what he says in verse 2, that actually the dead are better off because they don't have to think about it anymore.

But better than both those are those who have never been born and never even seen it, never even engaged with it. Now the writer doesn't say that because he's kind of ambivalent about these things and just thinks, well, just not knowing it would be better.

The writer isn't really talking about what we should do kind of structurally about justice and suffering in the world. He's not writing to say this is what you should do if you're in charge of a workplace or in charge of a country or in charge of a family or whatever it is.

Rather he's trying to notice not so much what is right or wrong, but what we're going to do to live in that world. How do you live in a world where injustice is going to happen?

[7:23] I have to say, I think personally I've been really slow on this lesson. I have been very naive over the years. I think just to recognize that the world is not always going to work out right.

You cannot fix every problem. You cannot solve every injustice. Perhaps this is a challenge to you too. If you're from a stable, largely good and fair home, you might be surprised when the world presents you with injustice.

That's not fair is what kids say, isn't it? And what adults say is, no, you're right. The world is not a fair place. Get used to it and suck it up.

There is an element of truth in that, isn't there? We do have to learn to live our lives in an unjust world. And we shouldn't live as if it's not. And so if you jump down to verse 4, you can see then a little bit about what is behind some of that injustice.

Verse 4 says, And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

[8:37] Now I think the connection between verses 1 to 3 and verse 4 is either that behind much injustice is envy, in other words, it is the envy that one has over another that leads to injustice and unfairness in the world, or the envy becomes the sort of go-to mechanism for most people to live in an unjust, unfair world.

As if, how am I going to possibly cope with a world where injustice is happening all the time? Well, maybe envy is a good motivator. Now perhaps it's both of those things, and you can see how both of them might work out.

You know, if we're in a place where people are oppressed and people have no power and there's no comforter, then really getting all the power for yourself, taking it off others and accumulating influence for yourself, is the way to control and protect yourself.

You know, this is the damaged child who becomes the controlling parent, or the revolutionary who becomes the dictator. But whatever the exact link, verse 4 is telling you that envy, self-centered, self-preservation, is a massive driving force behind lots that's done.

In fact, it says, it's not a driving force behind lots that's done, it's the driving force behind all that is done. I think he's speaking proverbially, isn't he?

[9:54] But that all toil and achievement are driven by this. But it means that he just sees it everywhere. Envy driving people to work hard and achieve stuff, I see it everywhere, he says.

It's worth just thinking, isn't it, that there is a difference between envy and jealousy. That jealousy is wanting what someone else has for yourself, right? So, you know, you have a nice coat, I would quite like that coat for myself, and say I go and get one.

Or you have a nice bike and I want a bike, so I go and get one. But envy is different to that. It looks at what someone else has. It doesn't only want it for itself, but it wants you not to have it as well.

It gets more excited, or at least as much excited, by depriving you of the thing as it does gain in it itself. Gibson, in his book, references Victor Hugo's famous poem about greed and envy.

I don't know if you know the poem. I'm not going to read it to you, it's too long. But he, she imagines these two characters, greed and envy, being personified.

[11:03] So, and in the poem, the narrator of the poem invites greed and invites envy to ask for whatever they wish. You can have whatever you want. The only condition is that whatever you ask for will be doubled and given to the other person as well.

And that obviously causes them a huge dilemma in the poem, because, you know, well, if I'm greed, and I ask for lots of money, but I know that envy over there is going to get twice as much money as I am, I'm not going to be satisfied.

And envy knows, well, if I ask for lots of money, and then greed gets double the money, that's not going to make me happy either. And so there's a silence in the poem. And then the silence is broken by envy. When envy says, I want you to remove one of my eyes.

And that's envy, right? Because it is not so much driven by its own success, but also by taking down of others. And the writer says, envy explains a lot that's done in our world, and why our world is so unjust, and it's not good.

It's not good. In verses five and six, the writer moves on to two other ways that this me focus works out in our lives. One is laziness.

[12:23] Verse five. Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. You know, if you're working mostly for me, if it's all about me, then I will just do the very minimum that is required of me.

I'll do even less if I can get away with it, right? But that leads to ruin, says verse five. Again, that's just a really familiar idea in wisdom literature. I think I put it on your handout. Proverbs 6, verses six to 11, is the famous passage in Proverbs about this.

Go to the ant, you sluggard. Consider its ways and be wise. It has no commander, no overseer or ruler. Yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.

How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest and poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed robber.

The opposite extreme is no better, really, and that is in verse six. Toil, to fill both hands, is a chasing after the wind.

[13:26] Staying up late, working to get to the top, to get ahead in the field, to be the one that gets the promotion, the one that gets the bonus, to see others writhe with pain as they see you succeed. That also is as pointless as laziness.

Laziness and busyness are not commended. There's a great little quote in Dave Gibson's books when he says, Workaholics are often warned that on their deathbed they will not wish that they'd spent more time at the office.

True, right? Ecclesiastes warns us that certain people on their deathbed will wish that they had spent at least some time at the office. Also true from Ecclesiastes. And so laziness and busyness are presented there as the two different options which the me-centered life presents us with.

But it hints at one which is better in verse 6a. But better than both, sorry, verse 6, better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

It is better to just fill one hand and enjoy the tranquility that comes from contentment than it is to toil to fill both hands.

[14:35] And that is a meaninglessness. Of course, this is Paul's point, isn't it? 1 Timothy 6, verse 6, Paul says, Godliness with contentment is great gain.

Interesting that the gain that people are looking for in material possessions is actually found in godliness with contentment, says Paul. The thing that you are striving for that you think you've filled your hands with when you've got all that money is actually not there.

Contentment is really the gain. Godliness with contentment rather than filling both hands. That's the tranquility of Ecclesiastes 4, verse 6. That's the win. Now, I think that is, I mean, it's massively countercultural, isn't it?

I'm sure it's countercultural in the writer's day, but it is definitely countercultural in London. But the point is that we should enjoy living the life that we have rather than wishing for one that we don't. And we should avoid the extremes of laziness and frantic activity between obsession with trying to do as little as possible or nothing and also trying really hard to fill both hands as if that was the purpose of life.

[15:40] And that contentment, when you find it, godliness with contentment will be a huge blessing to you. Now, I just want you to chat to the person next to you or a couple of people around you. Where do you think you find yourself driven by envy?

That's a tough question, right? So you might not want to be super honest, but you can be as honest as you feel like you're happy to be. Where do you see it in others, in your workplace? That's easier to point the fingers at other people, isn't it? So maybe you can speak about that.

How does it cause the injustice of our world? Maybe not just on a grand scale, but even on a micro scale around you in your friendship groups, perhaps, or in your workplace. Do you find yourself drawn to laziness or frantic activity?

What lies behind that? What might help you stop it? Okay, just go for those for a few minutes, just to land some of those ideas practically in your lives, and then we'll look at the second half. Sorry to interrupt your conversations.

Anyone want to feedback? Anything from their group? Maybe not.

[16:46] Sorry, I'm afraid you're... I'm going to interrupt. She works in sales, where she's, I think, meeting targets. Only a sound that depends on you beating others.

Yes. Because there's a tsunami. We're talking about the thing that I'm using the heart issue. Where is this flow in the phone? Yes. So could still be the one to sell the top seller and still keep doing that. Yes. So workplaces end up pinning salaries on the kind of envy motivator, don't they?

Yeah? So that success, we were talking about this, success is a zero-sum game. So if your colleague has got nine success points, you can, by definition, only have one success point. If they can have five, then you can have five. So you have inevitably got to take them off them in order to get them. Yeah. And that's a very, very tough place to be. And although it might drive massive, what does he say, achievement and work rate, it doesn't bring joy or community or friendship.

[18:01] And if those are your markers for success more than just money, then, yeah, it's tough. Yeah. Yeah. I suppose I was talking to you about this, but envy, a relapse for covetousness.

Hmm. But covetousness can be retention of what God wants you to give as well as what others think will have. Okay. So covetousness can be a retention of what God wants you to give away as well as wanting what others have.

Yeah. Interesting. Wow. I need to think about that some more. But yeah. Yes. I will let you do that and you can get back to me.

Thank you. Yeah. Thanks. I would rather think of it as just having one handful with tranquility. Anybody else?

Ethan, yes. I think the envy of the ease with which people get to do stuff.

[19:15] Okay. Yes. I work really hard with this, but somehow you've got to do it with yourself. Yes. Yes. I don't want you to be able to do that with them.

Yes. So we envy the ease with which others find success, seemingly. So I worked really hard. You didn't seem to work very hard. And we only did the same at the end. Why is it easy for you?

It's difficult for me. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That's the case I was making here with my wife. I envy the way she's able to do things for me to me. I think all the time to watch.

Right. Well, there you go. We'll have a counseling session later, you and me, Clifford. Yeah. Great. Let's move on so that we make sure we finish the passage.

Second heading then from verse 7. Love your neighbor and love yourself. In verses 7 and 8, you're introduced to a success story of fame and fortune, which turned out to be miserable and pointless. [20:17] Again, I saw something meaningless under the sun. There was a man all alone who had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. For who am I toiling, he asked.

Why am I depriving myself of enjoyment? This, too, is meaningless. A miserable business. It's like a guy or a girl at the top of their career having an epiphany in their penthouse apartment in the city. They're jumping up and down at all their great success. And then all of a sudden, they go, but I'm on my own. I have no friends. I have no one with me.

And then they realize that the reason that they have been doing all these things just doesn't really carry any kind of weight at all. Again, the problem is not really just the money, is it?

Rather, it's the person who's been so in love with money and with making money that they haven't realized until it's too late that money without friends or community or family is actually not worth having.

[21:16] There's a story in the book where Gibson quotes Matt Chandler in a sermon. And he's giving an illustration. He says he has never had a woman in his office complaining that her dad dropped her off at school in a beat up old car or that her dad didn't buy her a pony or didn't send her on the school skiing trip.

But, he says, I have had lots of women in my office who had dads with nice cars who bought them ponies and sent them on skiing trips but never spent any time with them and who as a result had a thoroughly warped perception of their own value.

That's it here, isn't it? That actually money with no friends or no relationships or with warped friendships and warped relationships is a wispy vapor. But more than just the kind of vapor meaninglessness, it is actually what he says a miserable business.

Miserable. The teacher's point, then, is that life is not about money but relationships with others. So, verse 9, two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor.

If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity the one who falls and has no one to help them up. Verse 11, also if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?

[22:33] Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. Here again, the benefits of working with others. You have a better return for your work. You may end up not only not being alone, but you may end up actually getting more of the material success that you also were looking for.

I think it's common to read verse 12 as being the third cord, being the Lord. But I don't think that's the point. I don't think it really fits with the style of Ecclesiastes.

I think it's a bit twee for the writer. I think the idea is that a three cord strand is just a stronger rope than a two cord strand. And a four cord rope would be even stronger.

You know, so two is better than one, three is better than two, four would be even better. It's the same idea, I think, in these last verses of the chapter. And I have to confess that I'm not sure that I understand right down to the bottom of what these verses are talking about.

But the old king, I think, also seems to be selfish. He seems not to be able to heed a warning any longer. So he seems to be that old guy who thinks that he knows it all, and so he doesn't need to listen to anybody.

[23:39] He assumes that he can go it alone. But he is outdone, even by a young man, even one from poor origins, even one from prison, whom everybody loves. But even their love can be fickle in the end.

So community is better than individuality. A collective rule is better than an isolated, self-interested, self-confident king. We'll go to the groups bit in a moment.

I'll go for my conclusion first, and then you can talk about that a bit as well. Let's try and just put some of the pieces together from what we've done for the last few weeks. The message of last week, if you might remember, was that the Lord has placed eternity in our hearts.

We have a longing for more of life than we are physically able to live. We have a longing for eternity, but we only have time in our hands. God has put eternity in our hearts and time in our hands.

And so we are unable, with what we are given, to build anything that lasts for as long as our heart desires. Only God builds what lasts for eternity. So ultimately, our satisfaction is only really ultimately going to be in the Lord.

[24:45] So the point of life is to enjoy what God has given us, the time blocks, if you like, for the period that he's given them to us. So we are to eat, drink, find satisfaction in our work, knowing that this is what God has given us to enjoy for now.

Now is the time for eating and drinking and working and finding satisfaction, because that is all that we have for now as we wait to enjoy and inherit what the Lord has built, which lasts forever and ever.

If that's true from last week, then the point of this section is that the way to enjoy those gifts that God has given us for the time that he has given us is to enjoy them with other people.

That's the key here. In other words, eating and drinking and finding satisfaction in our work is not possible for you if you are self-obsessed. That's the point.

You can only do it in community. Now, of course, that self-obsession really is the root of sin. Sin, in Martin Luther's terms, was an inward turn.

[25:50] Sin is curling in on yourself. Sin is the root of sin. And so what should have been sought from outside of yourself is sought from inside of yourself, right? So actually, that's what we do with the Lord, isn't it? God is out there.

And yet when we sin, we turn and look in as if God is in here and we get to decide and choose. And so liberation from self-interest and self-sufficiency is not through wise advice, but through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

You will not be able to find joy in community without a gospel of grace and forgiveness to transform you from the heart and turn you outwards.

And so we know, don't we, as whole Bible readers, that we need not just a recalibration, but we need the gospel. Yet still, right, envy, selfishness, the me first attitude is entirely possible by Christians who are still works in progress today.

And so we need to be careful, don't we? It is possible for us to be making the mistakes of Ecclesiastes 4, working really hard to fill both hands without the peace of one hand and contentment, or working really hard to get everything and then realizing that we haven't worked as hard to build community.

[27:04] And I think the challenge for you and I, where we are particularly, is I think we live in a particular part of the world where it is much easier, although it's not easy, it is much easier to make a career than it is to make a community.

And so actually, we are invited and persuaded to work hard at careers, but we are not really persuaded or encouraged to work hard at building community.

So I just want you in your groups for a few minutes as we finish, just to think, in what ways can you build community in your everyday? What are the challenges to that and why is that important? The other question, if we know that working really hard but having no friends is a recipe for misery, why do people, like, why do I have a friend who finds it so tempting?

Go for that, just for a few minutes with the person next to you. Okay, I'm really sorry. I know that's not long enough to talk about it, but you can carry on your conversations after we've closed in prayer.

Does anyone want to share anything particularly useful shared by their group? Yeah? Working in community.

[28:24] Come to Catalyst. Tomorrow? Nine o'clock? M&S; biscuits. M&S; biscuits. We were talking here about sometimes we mistake socialising for community.

It's possible to have a really busy social schedule, I was going to say, or social life, and actually still be quite lonely and lacking in community.

Because I don't think what the writer of Ecclesiastes is talking about is going out and pretending that you're somebody. It's more relating to someone every day and being real like that, isn't it?

And actually, again, I don't want to misquote somebody in our group, but we were saying, in a way, that's much easier as a Christian. Because when you're a Christian, you are able to be honest about who you are and what you're like.

Because the gospel gives you and liberates you from having to put on a face. Anything else? Yes. We were just talking about, like, our friends who are friends as well, and how it must be hard for

them, and someone who's buying community, because it's chips.

[29:45] That's a natural sense for community. And the fact that we all have shared values and a shared faith in Jesus who loves us, it gives us the ability to be, like, more vulnerable and honest with each other, because we know it's safe in relationships.

Yeah. But for people who aren't friends, unfortunately, it's harder for them to find a journey in a community like that. Yeah. Yeah, so the church community makes lots of this happen, and it should do, shouldn't it?

You should expect the gospel to build a community. Which is harder outside the church. It's why I think one of the strongest apologetics for the gospel is the church community, isn't it?

It's as people see the love that we have for one another, that they want to come and investigate crime. I guess another typical part was balancing all that promotion that really helped with raising that second child.

Yes. Like, what is worth it? Yes. So the question here is that basically it leads to some sort of ethical conundrums about trade-offs between, you know, the need for money and the need for time and, yeah, all those sorts of things.

[31:00] Yeah. And Ecclesiastes, he's not, he's, the writer here is not silly enough to give you a straight answer to all of those questions, is he? He's wise enough to say, here are the principles. Go, go work it out.

Yeah. Let me pray for us as we finish, and then you can carry on with conversations afterwards if you've got time. Heavenly Father, thank you that it is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ that liberates us from self-interest to be concerned, genuinely concerned for others.

And that it's as we are genuinely concerned for others that we find greater joy and contentment in this world as we wait for Christ's return. So please, we pray, help us, help us in our busy lives to prioritise building friendships and community, especially in the church, that we might keep going with the Lord Jesus and that we might be able to invite others to come and see what Jesus is doing amongst us.

And so we pray this for his glory and in his name. Amen.