

The Benefits of Contentment and Sharing

Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 - *“Then I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun: And look! The tears of the oppressed, but they have no comforter— On the side of their oppressors there is power, but they have no comforter. ² Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead, more than the living who are still alive. ³ Yet, better than both is he who has never existed, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.”*

Background Notes

These three verses form part of the conclusion of chapter 3. Remember, there were no chapter divisions in the original book of Ecclesiastes.

How do these form part of the conclusion to chapter 3? In chapter 3 we saw that God is totally sovereign, and He has a reason for everything. In addition, He has an appropriate time for everything. He has a reason for His plan and course of action. God has given us some insights into His reasons, but He has purposely not given us all the reasons.

God’s sovereign and appointed times involve all people and all events. As I’ve said many times before: “There are no maverick molecules in the universe” - nothing happens by “chance.” Even the though God hates the unrighteousness, evil, and injustice in this world, the evil acts of mankind are not outside of God’s control, and they serve a purpose in God’s overall plan. (For an example see Acts 2:23.)

Knowing that God is in complete control of all life’s appointed times and events, right down to the personal level, but has hidden most of the details from us, what should our proper response be? The wrong response would be to live life “under the sun,” without acknowledging God and His sovereignty. Unfortunately, that is the response of many people who reject God today.

The proper response is to live our lives in light of the divine revelation that God has given us. Then we will respond appropriately to the appointed times and events that God allows to come into our lives. If we live with God’s perspective, and in the light of divine revelation, we can live one day at a time. We can live joyously in the activities that the Lord gives us. *“So I perceived that nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?” (3:22).*

If we don't rise "above the sun" and see this conclusion through divine revelation, then the first three verses of chapter 4 are the only logical "under the sun" conclusion. There's so much oppression and evil in this world that many times death would be better than living with only the "under the sun" viewpoint. In fact, it would be better not to be born at all: *"Yet, better than both is he who has never existed, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun."*

How much better life will be if we view life and labor from "above the sun" - from God's perspective. Then we can live a joyous life, acknowledging God and His sovereignty, when we live in the light of His divine revelation, the Word of God.

The New Testament teaches that committed Christians will encounter times of suffering and persecution for the sake of Christ in our lives. But we shouldn't try to be persecuted. Our norm should be to live in peace with everyone (Romans 12:19) and to enjoy the things that God richly supplies us to enjoy. 1 Timothy 6:17 says, *"the living God... gives us richly all things to enjoy."*

What should our attitude be towards work? What's the proper response? Should we be workaholics, or should we try to do as little possible? The answer to that question is found in chapter 4.

Doctrinal Points

1. Contentment is better than striving.

Verses 4-6: *"Again, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind. ⁵ The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. ⁶ Better a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind."*

As Solomon looked around him at the world, he saw two work ethics. On the one hand, there were the workaholics (v4), who were out to get as much as they can - more than their neighbors. They were the "rat race" and "dog eat dog" crowd; rivalry and jealousy were the result.

On the other hand, there were the sluggards (v5). They were so lazy that they would starve to death rather than work. Do you know any people like that? (Did you say your teenager?!) Well, here's what Proverbs 6:9-11 says about the sluggard: *How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep— so shall your poverty come on you like a prowler, and your need like an armed man.*

So should we be stressed-out workaholics, or should we aim for sipping lemonade on a beach in Hawaii, doing a minimum amount of work? Neither! Verse 6 gives us the balance: *"Better a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind."*

That is moderation. The figurative language of the “two fists full” of the workaholic is futile. It is two fists full of wind! The picture of “one handful of rest and one handful of labor” conveys balance, and moderation, and contentment.

Contentment is better than striving.

This doctrinal point is certainly taught in the New Testament. 1 Timothy 6:6 says, *“Now godliness with contentment is great gain.”* Let me ask you: Are you content with what you God has provided for you? Contentment is better than striving.

2. Sharing is better than loneliness.

In verses 7-12, as Solomon looked over the labor landscape, he saw a group of individuals who had another approach and attitude towards work: they were the misers. Misers work long and hard, but they keep everything for themselves. They hoard their possessions. They don't share. They purposely cut off all ties, including family and friends. Talk about loneliness!

Do you know anyone like this? This is really sad and futile. Verse 8: *“There is one alone, without companion: he has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labors, nor is his eye satisfied with riches. But he never asks, “For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?” This also is vanity and a grave misfortune.”*

Sharing is always the way to go, in all areas of life and labor. Verses 9-12: *“Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. ¹¹ Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone? ¹² Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.”*

Sharing with others will result in help and assistance (v10), in comfort (v11), and in strength and security (v12). God did not design us to be miserly, hoarding loners. Listen to what God said about riches and what we should do with riches. 1 Timothy 6:17-18: *“Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, ready to share.”*

Sharing is better than loneliness.

Practical Application

Expect the crowd to be fickle.

Verses 13-16: *“Better a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more. ¹⁴ For he comes out of prison to be king, although he was born poor in his kingdom. ¹⁵ I saw all the living who walk under the sun; they were with the second youth who stands in his place. ¹⁶ There was no end of all the people over whom he was made king; yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind.”*

In these verses, an illustration is given. It’s a “rags to riches” story of a poor boy who even spent some time in prison, then rose to power and became a king. But he didn’t “live happily ever after,” because another popular “hero” arose to take over the throne.

This cycle of temporary popularity goes on, year-in and year-out, because people are fickle. If you depend on success and popularity, you will be disappointed. Seeking popularity and success is like striving after wind. Success and popularity are fleeting.

Steadfastness and loyalty are not the norm – they are rare. This is true in all areas of life - even including the ministry. It’s often been said, “You can please some of the people all of the time, and all the people some of the time, but you can never please all of the people all of the time.” Although this is not a Bible verse, it is a biblical truth that is certainly taught right here in Ecclesiastes.

So, don’t be discouraged if you’re experiencing disappointment with people right now. Expect the crowd to be fickle.