

Ecclesiastes: The Philipians of the Old Testament

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Chapter 4: Two by Two

From **observation**,
the Preacher learned that God has a design for all things (3:1–5:20).

As Michael Eaton points out, “Between 4:1 and 10:20 Ecclesiastes resembles the book of Proverbs, with short epigrams dealing with various aspects of life.”¹ In fact, this section cites a number of proverbs and its teachings parallel a number of texts contained in the book of Proverbs. These connections argue in favor of Solomon being the author of Ecclesiastes.

The fourth chapter of Ecclesiastes confronts four major problems in everyday life “under the sun”:

- the existence of unrelieved oppression (vv. 1–3),
- unsatisfied jealousy (vv. 4–6),
- unmitigated loneliness (vv. 7–12), and
- the uncertainty of political power and popularity (vv. 13–16).

The author mentions observing these problems (vv. 1, 4, 7, 15), letting us know that he is **an eyewitness** of these situations. The numeral “**two**” plays a major role in this chapter, occurring eight times (vv. 3, 6—dual form, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15)—translated sometimes as “both,” “dependent,” “another,” and “second.” Along with “two,” “one” occurs five times (vv. 8, 9, 10 *bis*, 11, 12) and is implied at least once (v. 6, “one hand”). “Three” makes its appearance once (v. 12).

Observing Oppression (4:1–3)

Four elements in verse 1 accentuate the text’s emotional intensity: (1) the root word for “oppress” occurs three times; (2) “behold” lends a dramatic effect; (3) “tears” and “comfort” highlight the emotional side of the situation; and, (4) the repetition of “no

¹ Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 90.

one to comfort.”² The writer does not approach this section dispassionately; he personally identifies with the reality of oppression, with the abuse of power.

The writer employs **the root word for “oppress”** only two other times in the book (5:8 and 7:7). *Elsewhere, Solomon uses the root five times (Ps 72:4; Prov 14:31; 22:16; 28:3, 17), demonstrating that he had knowledge of oppressive rulers and their oppressed subjects.* Possessors of power are the perpetrators of oppression (“on the side of their oppressors was power,” v. 1). Solomon observes **the “tears of the oppressed,”** revealing his sympathy for them. **Oppressed persons feel helpless and hopeless,** because they have “no one to comfort *them*” (stated twice for emphasis).

Similar declarations occur in Job (16:2; 21:34; 30:28) and five times in Lamentations 1 (vv. 2, 9, 16, 17, 21) as well as Psalm 69:20, Isaiah 54:11, and Zechariah 10:2 in order to emphasize a pathetic condition. The repetition sets the stage for the later discussion of loneliness and companionship (vv. 7–12). *Readers of the New Testament cannot help but be reminded that God’s people receive comfort from all three Persons of the godhead (Acts 9:31; 2 Cor 1:3–7).*

Solomon congratulates (or, praises) the dead for being better off than the oppressed who cannot enjoy their life under the sun (v. 2; cp. Job 3:3–5, 11–19; Jer 20:14–18). In 3:15–17 the writer advances future divine justice as the resolution of oppression. Here (4:1–3), however, death itself (even before the time of divine vindication and establishment of justice) offers a better alternative. This is consistent with the logical development of the text, since the writer introduces a discussion of death in the intervening section (3:18–22).³ Even better off is the individual who never existed, who had never been born (4:3). Such **“better (than)” axioms** occur 23 times in Ecclesiastes. The form also characterizes many of the wisdom statements contained in the central sections of the book of Proverbs, where they appear 24 times.

H. C. Leupold declares that, “There is nothing skeptical or cynical about such an attitude. It is the only permissible estimate that can be put upon earthly values apart from the heavenly.”⁴ Long ago, Franz Delitzsch commented on the statement that death or non-existence is better than living with oppression: “so long as the central point of man’s existence lies in the present life, and this is not viewed as the fore-court of eternity, there is no enduring consolation to lift us above the miseries of this present world.”⁵ *Solomon’s early assertion that God has “set eternity” (3:11) in the hearts of human beings supplies a source for hope in the midst of the negative experiences of life.*

For those who deny Solomonic authorship for Ecclesiastes, the text’s discussion of oppression appears “awkward when attributed to the mind of Solomon. Not only could Solomon have done something about oppression, but he, according to the historical books, contributed heavily to it in the last days of his life (1 Kings 11).”⁶ Such an

² See these elements identified by R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 81.

³ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC 14 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 306.

⁴ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), 104.

⁵ Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, trans. by M. G. Easton, Commentaries on the Old Testament, C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch (reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), 274.

⁶ Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 132–32.

approach ignores the depth of Solomon's God-given wisdom, the breadth of his international relationships, the extent of his access to situations in many neighboring lands, and the variety of his personal experiences.

Scripture condemns the abuse of power. God consistently reminds His people of the sins of exploitation and oppression (Exod 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:13; Deut 24:14; Ps 62:10; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5). The godly not only refrain from oppressing others, they will actively seek justice for the oppressed (Deut 16:19–20; Ps 106:3; Prov 21:3, 15; Isa 1:17; Mic 6:8; cp. Matt 23:23; Col 4:1).

Observing Jealousy (4:4–6)

Envy, jealousy, covetousness, and greed all serve to motivate people to work with fervor and through long hours. Jealousy carries with it a positive connotation only in regard to the relationship between God and His people and the marital relationship.⁷ Jealousy or envy divides families (Gen 30:1; 37:11), kills (Job 5:2), harasses (Isa 11:13), and produces anger (Prov 6:34), “rotteness to the bones” (perhaps illness, Prov 14:30), and hatred (Ezek 35:11). One should not envy a violent person (Prov 3:31) or sinners (Prov 23:17). *No wonder the Scripture describes this sort of labor or work as “evil”* (v. 3). Such work displays a dog-eat-dog attitude wherein a person seeks to get ahead, even if he or she must step on colleagues in their climb to the top of the corporate ladder. In Walter Kaiser's examination of this passage, he acknowledges that “men can be as cruel and inhuman to each other in unnecessary competition as they can be in oppression.”⁸ It is more popular to criticize corporate greed and political oppression than to recognize that such great injustices originate with the envy and jealousy that too often motivates a person in his or her own drive to succeed at any cost.

Solomon constructs a **contrast between verses 4 and 5**. The avaricious individual of verse 4 displays too much ambition and too little contentment, whereas the indolent individual of verse 5 exhibits too little ambition and excessive contentment.⁹ **Folding the hands** appears elsewhere in Proverbs 6:10 and 24:33 depicting the slumber of a lazy person. Lying on their beds, they fold their hands over their chest or bosom as they sleep. Biblical wisdom writers condemn laziness and associate the characteristic with fools (Prov 6:9; 10:26; 12:27; 13:4; 15:19; 19:15, 24; 20:4; 21:25; 22:13; 24:30; 26:14, 16; cp. Matt 25:24–30). Commentators understand “**consumes his own flesh**” (v. 5) in at least three different ways: (1) self-cannibalism speaking metaphorically of self-destruction,¹⁰ (2) “still has his meat to eat”¹¹, and (3) reducing oneself to poverty.¹² The first of these appears to be most consistent with the imagery and the context.

⁷ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 187. See Exod 20:5; 34:14; Num 5:14–30; 25:11, 13; Song of Sol 8:6; Zech 1:14; 8:2; cp. 2 Cor 11:2.

⁸ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 72.

⁹ Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 322.

¹⁰ Robert Gordis, *Koheleth—The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 241.

¹¹ Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, WBC 23A (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 31.

¹² George Aaron Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, ICC (1908; reprint, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1971), 114.

By means of yet another proverb, the writer of Ecclesiastes expresses the truth that **contentment can exist where the individual actually possesses fewer material goods, but finds satisfying rest (v. 6).** “Fists” consists of a word that indicates the cupping of the hands to be able “to take as much as possible”¹³ (see Exod 9:8; Lev 16:12; Prov 30:4; Ezek 10:2, 7). In other words, *preoccupation with the pursuit of wealth is as evil as laziness*. Solomon declared in Psalm 127:2,

It is vain for you to rise up early,
To retire late,
To eat the bread of painful labors;
For He gives to His beloved *even in his sleep*.

Elsewhere, he binds contentment to the believer’s relationship to the Lord (Prov 15:16; 16:8) and to harmonious and loving relationships with others (Prov 15:17).

Observing Loneliness (4:7–12)

The third reference to observation (v. 7) gets directly to the usual summary declaration of “vanity” ahead of reporting his observations. In verse 3 Solomon’s summary omits the word, but depicts non-existence as preferable to oppression. Then, in verse 4, he brings the summary forward (“This too is vanity and striving after wind”) after briefly describing what he had observed. Whereas **verses 1–3 speak of no comforter and verses 4–6 imply no rest, verses 7–12 dwell on the concept of no companion.**¹⁴

An exact rendering of the opening words of verse 8 reveals both the concise nature of the statement and the usage of two numbers: **“There is one and there is not a second.”** The writer introduces a discussion of loneliness (the one alone) and companionship (the one with a second). He qualifies what he means by “not a second”: “neither a son nor a brother.” *Even the Lone Ranger needs Tonto*. An individual who isolates himself from companionship fails to experience community and its God-ordained blessings. God Himself declared of the perfect man in his unfallen state, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen 2:18). **God advocates companionship over solo lives.**

Self-made hermits tend to be selfish and focused on the riches they hope their labor will bring to them. “Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches” reminds the reader of the earlier proverb in 1:8. A third mention arises in 5:10 where the writer offers further clarification: “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance *with its income.*” **Why do people end up alone?**

There are various reasons a person like this ends up alone. We can speculate as to why, and his workaholicism may provide a clue. It is more likely that for circumstantial reasons this person has found himself alone, and in this rough situation, he has sought meaning in work and wealth. But they fail to provide the meaning he seeks.¹⁵

Note that the translators of NAU have placed “*and he never asked*” (v. 8) in italics. The phrase does not occur in the original language. Does Solomon himself ask the question or is this just a general hypothetical illustration? Some commentators find in verses 7–8 a situation involving **the absence of an heir**, while verses 9–12 involve **the absence of a companion**, and verses 13–16, **the absence of a successor.**¹⁶ Duane Garrett

¹³ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 93; Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 115.

¹⁴ Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, 73.

¹⁵ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 189.

¹⁶ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 41.

offers a pithy and apropos synopsis: “Money is their only kin.”¹⁷ Preoccupied with climbing the corporate ladder, a man often tells himself that he does so in order to take care of his family, but, in reality, he is caught up in his projects to make a name for himself. His family soon becomes a casualty due to his neglect for their real welfare.

Do you know someone who fits the illustrative examples that you read about here in Ecclesiastes? Solomon identifies three examples of solitary existence in contrast to companionship in order to make his point. All three might arise from the experience of travel in the ancient Near East. The first might refer to falling into a pit or a ravine (v. 10), the second might describe attempts to keep warm outdoors during the cold of night (v. 11), and the third might refer to robbers encountered along the road (v. 12). The lessons should not be restricted to travel, however. **A helper, a comforter, and a defender** all apply to many life settings.

References to **a three-strand or three-ply rope (cord)** occur in ancient Sumerian and Akkadian texts. In the Sumerian story of Gilgamesh’s encounter with Humbaba, guardian of the Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh exhorts his friend Enkidu not to abandon his quest. He says, “Two men will not die; the towed rope will not sink. A towrope of three strands cannot be cut. You help me and I will help you.” This mention of the three-strand rope concludes the section dealing with pairs of people. The numeric arrangement reflects the pattern $x + (x + 1)$, which occurs in a number of Old Testament passages. Such a pattern normally implies fullness or a full measure.

Compare Jesus’ statement in **Matthew 18:20**, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.” Indeed, if two are better than one, how much better might it be to have three people. And, how much better to have those two or three and also have the Lord Himself present!

Observing Politics (4:13–16)

Sometimes the aged lack wisdom and act foolishly (Job 12:20). On the other hand, the younger may be wiser than their elders (Ps 119:100). Old Testament writers employ the word for “lad” (v. 13) for Joseph at the age of 17 (Gen 37:30) and for the companions of Rehoboam when he was over the age of 40 (1 Kgs 12:8; cp. the first use of the term in Gen 4:23), as well as utilizing the term to describe young children (Gen 21:8; Exod 2:9). **Therefore, the contrast focuses on relative ages, not on someone being very young.**

Suggestions for **identifying the kings in this text** include Joseph (see v. 14, “he has come out of prison”) and Pharaoh as well as Saul and David. Another incident involves Solomon’s son Rehoboam who ignored the advice of his counselors (1 Kgs 12:1–19). Henry Morris speculates that the entire story stems from the Lord’s revelation given to Solomon in 1 Kings 11:11–13. Solomon himself had become foolish and one of his servants whom Solomon and driven into exile in Egypt (1 Kgs 11:26–40) would supplant Solomon’s son, Rehoboam (1 Kgs 12:1–24), though Rehoboam would still retain power over one tribe.¹⁸ Ahijah the prophet confirmed the revelation given by the Lord to Solomon (1 Kgs 11:29–39). If the illustration in Ecclesiastes 4:13–16 actually possesses a historical precedent, the prophetic announcements to Solomon and Jeroboam would seem to fit the best. *However, there is insufficient evidence to enable a dogmatic identification.*

¹⁷ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 307.

¹⁸ Henry M. Morris, *The Remarkable Wisdom of Solomon: Ancient Insights from the Song of Solomon, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2001), 200–1.

Even in the modern era, former political prisoners or exiled leaders occasionally replace a foolish regime (e.g., Iran, Nicaragua, South Africa, and South Korea).

Prisons in the ancient Near East did not house criminals and traitors alone. Often **the prisons were filled with individuals unable to pay their debts or to fulfill their financial obligations.**¹⁹ Thus, also mentions that the second king was poor as well as the fact that he was born in poverty (Eccl 4:13–14).

An underlying lesson applies to **the wisdom of accepting advice and counsel.** The king proves to be foolish when he “no longer knows *how* to receive instruction” (v. 13). The term used for “instruction” might also be translated “admonition” or even “warning.” In essence, the aged king was acting as a loner, refusing to listen to his counselors. Proverbs identifies wise counsel as characteristic of the best plans and decisions (11:14; 15:22; 20:18; 21:5; 24:6; cp. Luke 14:31). Of course, *the best counsel comes from God Himself* (Prov 16:1, 3, 9; 19:21). Solomon lived long enough, had enough interaction with fellow royals throughout the Near East, and gathered enough information from his ships’ voyages to India and Africa to have learned of such a situation in another land.

In brief, wisdom, age, power, youth, political astuteness, and popularity all fail to guarantee political success or longevity. In the end, subsequent generations of citizens will forget both the wise and the foolish, the aged and the young, the popular and the unpopular.

Conclusion

Generation after generation, people seek solutions to the problems of humanity in both the social and moral realms. They expend wealth and power on attempting to right society’s wrongs. *Frustratingly, however, every attempt meets failure.* Every “Great Society” eventually collapses and the advances of decades disappear in the dust of another depression, another war, or another natural disaster. Derek Kidner’s keen observation about 4:1–3 provides a potential association between the oppression in verses 1–3 and the political inconsistencies of verses 13–16. He notes **the paradox that a transfer of power to promote change actually “limits the possibility of reform itself, because the more control the reformer wields, the more it tends to tyranny.”**²⁰

The all-inclusive fallen condition of humanity defies self-restoration. As Michael Kelley observes, “The masses willingly support revolution because they cannot believe that the fault lies in them.”²¹ The indelible sinful nature of fallen mankind prevents the success of setting up the kingdom of God apart from the return of Jesus Christ. Ideal social justice must await the Righteous One Himself.

Questions:

- Why are oppressed people hopeless and helpless?
- In what ways does envy lead to a loss of companionship?
- Who are the believers’ companions?
- Why do political solutions to society’s problems fail?

¹⁹ Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 325–26.

²⁰ Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance: Ecclesiastes & the Way of the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 44.

²¹ Michael Kelley, *The Burden of God: Studies in Wisdom and Civilization from the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Minneapolis: Contra Mundum Books, 1993), 94.