

# “Don’t Settle for a Better Life, Choose the Best Life”

## *Ecclesiastes 4*

Solomon spent a good portion of his life looking for meaning, contentment and purpose ‘under the sun’. One can only assume he took his eyes off God for some time (since we know his many marriages resulted in him worshipping many gods). Yet his foundational world view with God at the center was deeply rooted in his life. Perhaps, like many, he just wanted to see for himself if there was a better life ‘under the sun’.

He ended Ch. 3 talking about injustice ‘under the sun’. Life is not fair under the sun because we live in a sin-filled world. Justice will only come from God and we may have to wait until we die before we see it. But God will right all wrongs one day. We can trust Him to do that very thing if we believe Jesus died for all the sins of the world. And if people don’t believe in Jesus, God is fair in giving them exactly what they wanted in life; an absence of His presence for all eternity.

Injustice must still be on his mind as Ch. 4 begins. In these 16 verses he makes ‘under the sun’ observations about four aspects about life that are disappointing. And in his best ‘under the sun’ [if God isn’t in your life] he sees its better to have this than that. A very pessimistic outlook. However, since we know this is only his temporal view and that he makes the conclusion that the best life is a life lived for God, we will approach each situation from the best view, a life above the sun view. He begins in v.1

*Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed— and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comforter.*

<sup>2</sup> *And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive.*

<sup>3</sup> *But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.*

“Again, I looked” (v.1); “Again I saw” (v.4); “Again I saw” (v.7); and “I saw” (v.15). Four common life situations that disappoint or seem unfair and in each case he offers something is ‘better’ but only “under the sun”. However, we know Solomon knew God who offered something best above the sun that was far better than anything one could find the world offers. He starts with the subject of oppression and that one who has already died and is no longer being oppressed by people or life’s discouragements is better than being oppressed. Then he says from an under-the-sun perspective it’s better that you were never born or experienced this at all! Is that the best the world offers? Life is hard and sometimes unfair because of the sinfulness of humanity. So we do need friends to receive the comfort we need:

## **It's Comforting to Have Friends, But God is the Best Comforter (4:1-3)**

If we look at life from God’s perspective we can become very pessimistic about life. We can look at the suffering in the world and conclude that it might be better not to have lived if that is your only options. But we don’t have that choice. We exist, we live. We’re here, our kids and grandkids exist in this world right now. We will all experience hardship in life and we need friends who will

support us and come alongside us and share life's burdens. Some can relate to us on a deeper level than others because they have gone through what we have. But people are not perfect. They will let us down. And they will fail to comfort us when we need it.

Sometimes we may have no one to comfort us. What do we do then? The world says things like, 'chin up', 'tomorrow will be better', 'someone is always worse off than you' or sadly, follow the humanistic under-the-sun only perspective and say, 'you can check out of this life you know'. And sadly some do.

But if we know the Lord, He is always with us.

*Ps. 23:4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

Jesus even became one of us so He could sympathize with us.

*Heb. 2:17 For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. <sup>18</sup> Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*

*Heb. 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

We need Christian friends especially who can remind us of these truths. Not just to give us Christianized platitudes. 'The Lord has a plan for your pain', 'Let go and let God', 'You got to have more faith' but to point us to the One who knows all our suffering and sorrows. Let's make sure we're pointing each other in the right direction with God's actual words,

*2 Cor. 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup> who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. <sup>5</sup> For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.*

Having friends is better than no friends – true. But knowing God is always with us in our difficulty and knowing He can give us peace that surpasses all understanding to guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, is best.

Solomon now comments about something else he has observed in vv.4-6.

<sup>4</sup> And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. <sup>5</sup> *The fool folds his hands and ruins himself.* <sup>6</sup> *Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.*

Here Solomon comments on how people work out of envy or a sense of rivalry. They want to do better and be more successful than someone else in a similar business. He says this is a futile exercise, especially after his observations in Ch. 3 where he said what's the point of gathering wealth when you don't know whether it will be wasted or invested after you die.

## **It's Good to Be Motivated to be Better, It's Best to be Content in God (4:4-6)**

There's nothing wrong with healthy motivation. It could be to make your product better than the previous version or what someone else offers. It may to improve your skills from the way you used to do it. You accomplish a task or finish a job and conclude, 'I can do better next time'. It may to improve the business, to have better numbers than last year's. These are not wrong, but what Solomon is getting at here is wrong if this is what you live for. If you wake up in the morning and the first thing on your mind is your productivity levels, how you can get more done in less time. How you can get to work faster if you find a quicker route. Or get to work earlier to get more done. If your mind is constantly consumed with these types of goals, you're missing life. You're missing out on what's important – God and people. You haven't learned the secret of contentment.

*Phil. 4:10 I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup> I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. <sup>12</sup> I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. <sup>13</sup> I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*

Paul said I have learned the secret of not worrying about whatever it is I need at the time in any situation; because I am content in Christ who knows I need to work to pay bills. Who knows I have deadlines to meet but also children to disciple and love. Who knows the pursuit of success or comfort/wealth is a strong temptation but it can't replace the love of God or family.

Solomon has already visited this area. Back in 2:24 he concluded about work and stuff by saying,

*Ecc. 2:24 A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, <sup>25</sup> for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?*

Work hard, do your best; but don't make it your life. Enjoy the accomplishment of a finished task because you're made in the image of God who enjoyed the finished task of creation and then rested from His accomplishment. Enjoy the successes of life when they come no matter how big or small, and rest from it and be content. The fool folds his hands and does nothing, Solomon says. Don't give up and do nothing. That's even worse. But on the other hand, 'one handful of rest is better than 2 handfuls of labor and striving. And the word picture of two handfuls is the two cupped together so you can get as much as possible in it. Be content in God as Solomon also said in Ch. 3

*<sup>12</sup> I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. <sup>13</sup> That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his toil—this is the gift of God. <sup>14</sup> I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it.*

And if what we're accomplishing is specifically ministry or for the glory of God, know that whatever we did for God will be remembered by God forever. So rest, be content with that.

Solomon looked again and saw something else that is disappointing in life – loneliness. He saw a single man with no children, working hard, getting wealthier – for what? Meanwhile depriving himself of pleasure – which follows naturally from what he just said in vv.4-6. Then he talks about how two are better than one. How friends and family are essential to get through life. And yet,

## **It's Wonderful to Have Family, But it's Best to Depend on God (4:7-12)**

In vv.9-12 Solomon sounds like he is describing the travelling life. You travel from town to town for business (v.9). If you fall and hurt yourself on a path its good to have someone to help you (v.10). When you sleep outdoors somewhere overnight you sleep close so you can stay warm (v.11). And v.12 if you're attacked along the way, you have someone to defend you. So he's talking about dependency of companions, and what better companions do we have that we depend on than family. We love them. We need them. Life sure would be lonely without them.

But then he throws in one more thought which seems disconnected to the travelling scenario in v.12, 'A cord of three strand is not quickly broken (or torn apart)'. And this may be a reference to a 3<sup>rd</sup> friend or perhaps a child because if the sad thing he saw was an unmarried man with no children then the best thing under-the-sun would be to be married with children. Three are better than two for sure, but why did he stop at 3. Why didn't he just say there are safety in numbers?

If God is intended to be the 3<sup>rd</sup> 'cord' in this scenario then we have all we need. Who better to defend us than God? If God is for us who can be against us? When we accept Jesus Christ as our Saviour, we are welcomed into the family of God. We now have His Spirit dwelling in us. Our salvation is secured. Eph. 6 tells us we don't need to defeat Satan we only need to stand firm in the armour of God; salvation, His Word, the gospel, His Spirit and prayer. Solomon uses the 3<sup>rd</sup> cord in the context of standing against an attacker. As won-derful and blessed as family is, family alone cannot defend you and I against the attacks of the enemy. Only God can.

Disciples of Jesus sometimes struggle to put God before family. Jesus warned us not to worship family over God. In Matt. 10:34 He said some hard words:

<sup>34</sup> *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.*  
<sup>35</sup> *For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—* <sup>36</sup> *a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'*

<sup>37</sup> *"Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; <sup>38</sup> and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. <sup>39</sup> Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

How do we love family more than Jesus? When we choose one over the other. When family trumps worship, fellowship, time in the Word, etc. Jesus acknowledged this would not be easy; its hard. How often, when we're faced with a choice between being with family or being with God, do we choose God? How often do we excuse ourselves from obligations or opportunities to worship or serve God because of family? We all love our families more than anything else 'under the sun', but do we show by our choices that we love them even more than God? God calls that idolatry.

The apostle Peter wrestled with this just as we do. In Matt. 19:27, just after the rich young ruler refused to give up what he trusted in to follow Jesus, Peter asked Jesus, 'We have left everything to follow You? What's in it for us?' And I believe Peter inferred family because of how Jesus answered.

<sup>29</sup> *And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. <sup>30</sup> But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.*

Solomon saw another thing that he found sad under the sun in v.13.

<sup>13</sup> Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning. <sup>14</sup> The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. <sup>15</sup> I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. <sup>16</sup> There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

An old foolish king is one who in his pride and arrogance no longer listens to advice and wisdom. Not surprisingly, the people turn to the young successor because of his small beginnings and inferred here, is his humility and willingness to listen to wisdom. But over time that too changes because as he gets older, his subjects grow tired of him and look for someone new. Popularity is fickle, because people are fickle. So we need to learn one more 'best' truth here

## **It's Flattering to be Popular but its Best To be Loved by God (4:13-16)**

Solomon either tells a parable or shares a well-known story with his audience. It sounds a little like Joseph being rescued to becoming second in the kingdom but the bible doesn't tell us anything about his waning popularity. Nor do we know who this old king is who no longer listens to wisdom. Solomon stresses poverty and wisdom over wealth and fame. That's what he's essentially talking about here. Popularity and fame usually lead to arrogance and pride. Not every time but quite often.

We have to interpret all these verses in the framework of Solomon's final conclusion The book ends <sup>13</sup> Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. <sup>14</sup> For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil

Solomon is telling young people to follow God because if you don't, there is a judgment. While God remembers every evil deed He also remembers every good deed we who know Him and love Him have done. Solomon warns the unbeliever here who has yet chosen the best thing in life; to know God and serve Him. Because God loves us and if we have placed our faith in Him and His Son Jesus what does God do with all our selfish, unrighteous deeds?

*Ps. 103:8 The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. <sup>9</sup> He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; <sup>10</sup> he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. <sup>11</sup> For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; <sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*

It's better to be known and loved by God then be the most popular in school, the most successful businessperson, to have the most Facebook friends or win an election in a landslide. The best thing in life is to know God. To know He loves you so much, He remembers every evil deed we've done yet pays the penalty for our sins with his Son's death and chooses never to bring them up again. And He remembers every good thing we do for Him and His glory that He rewards us one day in eternity.

There are bad ways to live and there are better ways to live yet they still don't include God. But the best life is to know God, to thank Him for every blessing and to obey His commands, even difficult ones and trust everything to Him.

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