

THE VANITY OF SELFISH TOIL

ECCLESIASTES 4:1-8

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LESSON OUTLINE:

Oppression (*Eccl. 4:1-3, Job 35:9, Psalm 12:5, Eccl. 3:16*)

Work (*Eccl. 4:4-6, Prov. 6:10, 24:33*)

Companionship (*Eccl. 4:7-8, Prov. 27:20, Eccl. 5:10, 1Jn.2:16, Eccl. 2:18-21*).

INTRODUCTION:

The Preacher considers those in the world who suffers oppression in a statement which he said with passion, he finds the oppressed have no comforter and the power lies on the side of the oppressors, because of these two factors the oppressed have no hope (*Eccl. 5:8-9*). He also considered those who work without work life balance and without successor or persons who will inherit whatever they have acquired when they are no more. That leads to the importance of companionship as one exists in this world. Definitely no one can be an island without interacting with others and enjoy a meaningful life.

OPPRESSION IN THE WORLD

And really – what more is there to life? So, in these chapter we get a good cross-section of issues of life and how to approach them.

So, let's study first of all, what the Preacher has to say about the awful reality of oppression in this world in (*Eccl. 4:1-3*).

First – let us notice that oppression doesn't go unnoticed. The Preacher considered it. And God notices it, too. But we need to understand that this is one of those sections where God seems to be out of the picture allowing the oppressors continue with their oppressive tendencies. There's a time when the Preacher can comfort himself that God will make all wrongs right – like we saw with the matter of injustice in the places of judgement. But here in (*Eccl. 4:1-3*), the Preacher doesn't bring God into the picture.

Now, again, the Preacher wants to lead us through this thought about oppression – not as a king who can actually do something about oppression – but as one who is experiencing it just like anyone else who has no power to change it himself.

And in this case, the Preacher wants to lead us through this scenario as one who is not even able to comfort himself with the thought of God's future judgement. How does a lost man – who is sensitive to the plight of the oppressed, and yet can't do anything about it – how does he view this oppression?

Well, the Preacher notices this oppression as he said. He sees the tears of the oppressed. He witnesses the total lack of anyone to comfort the oppressed. And in fact, the ones who are doing the oppressing have power on their side. They can force their oppression on others. **(Eccl.5:8-9)**

The Dead Have It Better:

And this is all the Preacher can come to genuinely, disturbed and as a lost man – the dead are to be praised or considered more fortunate or congratulated. Why? Because they are not around to see this maddening injustice. **(Eccl.7:1b)**

Those Not Born Are Better

And actually – to take it a step further – this situation of oppression is so deeply disturbing to a sensitive but lost man that he will conclude that it is better to just never be born into this kind of world where oppression is continuous and unstoppable. **(Eccl. 4:3)**

I am not saying that the Preacher is a lost man. In fact, he can't be, based on other things he says. But I am saying that the Preacher is leading us through the mindset of a lost and frustrated persons, or at least how a lost man would logically think about this issue of oppression in this world. And then he just leaves it there for now to discuss situation of work.

ISSUES OF WORK:

There Is something perhaps a little unsatisfying with that kind of abrupt ending to this consideration. But isn't that how life is apart from God? It is unsatisfying. And the Preacher's abrupt transition to another topic in **(Eccl. 4:4-6)** mirrors how life is without being able to rest in God and his sovereignty because of human characters.

Finding Balance in the Realities of Work

Well, next, the Preacher turns to consider work. In particular, he leads us through finding balance in the realities of work in **(Eccl. 4:4-6)**.

Envy or Rivalry

So, to start, every work and skill that a man has is depending on how you interact and translate your skill with those who patronize or employ your services.

The stimulus that causes others to envy

The result of rivalry between that man and others

In either way – the Preacher says that this is vanity. I think I actually prefer the first reading that we have here in the King James Version. Because competition isn't necessarily in my mind as it is meaningless. We benefit from healthy competition. But no one benefits from envy. Envy is truly vain and meaningless and has no profit. So, envying the abilities and skills and labor of others is vain. So, avoid envy.

Laziness

And while you are avoiding envy – (**Eccl. 4:5-6**) avoid laziness in regard to work. The fool sits back and folds his hands. He doesn't work. And because he doesn't work neither should he eat. And that is the idea in the second part of (**Eccl 4:5**). The fool eats his own flesh – or is pictured as doing so – because there is nothing to eat due to all of his laziness (**2 Thes. 3:10b**). So, let us avoid envy and laziness.

Be Happy

And as you are avoiding envy and laziness – be happy with a tranquil and quiet life when you are blessed with what to eat and drink (**Eccl. 4:6**).

Now, all else being equal, would you rather have one handful of something or two? Like – gold. Would you rather fill one hand with gold or two? You would want two portraying greed.

But balance that with the kind of lifestyle that attends your two handfuls of whatever it is. Sometimes it is better to settle for less compensation or whatever else if it is a calm and quiet situation – rather than receiving double and doing so through a great amount of labor and crisis.

In other words, don't overcompensate in light of the last warning against laziness and swing totally to the opposite end of where you are working constantly and at a fainting pace simply to accumulate more stuff to yourself. Find a middle ground. I think that is what the Preacher is advising us. So, avoid envy. Avoid laziness. And avoid overworking yourself just to get ahead materially. Find balance in the realities of work. Work life balance is advised.

The Benefits of Companionship

Now, the Preacher moves on to consider the benefits of companionship in (**Eccl. 4:7-8**). (**Ref.1jn 2:16, Eccl. 2:18-21**).

Don't be a Workaholic

Now, in a sense, (**Eccl 4:7-8**) are a continuation of the previous section about finding a balance in your work life. The Preacher is still addressing work and an imbalanced view of it. The guy in this new section is working so hard. There is no end to his work. And yet strangely he is not satisfied with all that work and what it produces – riches.

But (**Eccl. 4:7-8**) also translate us into considering companionship. The man is “one” and he is “alone”. He doesn’t have a “second” or a partner. He doesn’t even have a child or sibling. He is all alone in this world. And he is laboring so hard – but ultimately, he never asks himself – and he should – whom he is actually laboring for, to such an extent that he is missing out on some good things in life that would be right for him to pursue and enjoy. So, we find in (**Eccl. 4:7-8**) a combination of:

A warning to keep work – and life beyond work – consider work life balanced.

The benefits of companionship

And really, we see the negative argument for companionship here. The man doesn’t have anyone else to share his work and its fruit with him. He is not happy with riches and yet he is not able to improve the life of others with his excessive labor.

Here, the Preacher keeps some of his earlier emphasis on work – but the emphasis is much heavier on the concept of companionship and its benefits. Companionship is very Important in every one’s life. One suffers a lot of things if you are alone. Two is better than one. That is the Preacher’s contention. Why are two better than one? First of all, generally speaking, two get more work done than one. There is a good reward for their labor.

Further, two people can support each other. If one falls and he is all alone – there is no one else there and so there is no one to help him get back up. But if there is a second, that person can help the first get back up. And that falling and getting back up can apply to physical falls or even to non-physical, emotional or spiritual falls. Consider the wisdom of God in the appointment of leaders in the Church (**Acts 14:23, 20:17, Phil. 1:1 Tit. 1:5**).

CONCLUSION:

We have started Ecclesiastes, chapter 4 dealing with the awful realities of oppression in this life. We also explored work and finding the right balance in our minds regarding work. That led to a consideration of the benefits of companionship which is a reality of life. So long as we live in this world, old or young, man or woman we all needs companionship to support one another for procreation or other necessity of life and to live a legacy or continuity when we are no more.