

Life Together

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- [0 : 0 0] Great. Well, we're going to be looking at Ecclesiastes chapter 4 this morning. A quick recap, a quick reminder of our headline for this book. This is a book which is all about searching for meaning.
- This is a book of the Bible where we have, as we saw right back in chapter 1, verse 1, the words of the preacher. And the preacher is searching for what life is all about and how that shapes how we should live our lives in the present.
- How do we find the good life, as many people have put it. A few ideas that we've seen in this book so far that the preacher has been teaching us.
- That we need to face up to the fact that our life is brief. A breath, as the preacher says. That's what that word vanity literally means. The breath of life.
- We've seen as well we need to be realistic about what life is like. The difficult bits as well as the good bits. We saw that last week with the different seasons of life that we face.
- [1 : 0 6] And perhaps most of all we've seen that we need to look for our satisfaction. We need to look for our meaning, our purpose in life in the right place. We need to look for that in something that lasts.
- And that means keeping God in the picture and recognizing that all that we have is given by him. So those are the things, some of the things that we've already spoken about. Those are themes we'll return to in Ecclesiastes as well.
- You can catch up on any of those online as well if you've missed those. But chapter 4 that we get to this morning is going to add really another key element into that mix. And that new element is this.
- How do other people fit into the picture? We are not the only people in our lives. No man is an island. So in our increasingly kind of individualized and polarized world, how do we relate well with others?
- What a key question that is for our time. That's what we're going to be looking at this morning. So let's read that passage and have a look at that.
- [2 : 1 4] Barry is going to come and read that for us. That's Ecclesiastes chapter 4 verses 1 to 16, page 555 in the Blue Bibles. Thanks Barry.
- Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed. And they had no one to comfort them.
- On the side of their oppressors there was power. And there was no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead, who are already dead, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive.
- But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor.
- This also is vanity and a striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.

[3 : 24] Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind. Again I saw vanity under the sun.

One person who has no other, either son or brother. Yet there is no end to all his toil. And his eyes are never satisfied with riches.

So that he never asks, For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure? This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up.

Again, if two lie together, they keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him.

[4 : 31] A threefold cord is not quickly broken. Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice.

For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom had been born poor. I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place.

There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him.

Surely, this also is vanity and a striving after wind. Thanks very much, Barry.

And it would be worth keeping your Bibles open there at Ecclesiastes chapter 4 as we have a look at it together. There's a great film from 2007 called Into the Wild.

[5 : 38] Some folk might have seen that. It's an adaptation of a book with the same title. And it's the true story of a guy called Chris McCandless who, dissatisfied with his normal life, went in search of adventure.

He traveled all over the United States, really trying to find the answer to that question, what's life all about? What's the point? Asking these Ecclesiastes type questions, how do we make sense of life?

What are we here for? He went through various different places. He saw and tried all sorts of different things. He ended up out in the middle of nowhere in Alaska, all by himself.

And at the risk of ruining the end of the book, of the film, he died out there in the wilderness. Again, it's a true story. He either starved or accidentally poisoned himself.

And that was his end. I should say the film is a bit more fun than that summary would suggest, and I would recommend it. But after his body had been found, in his belongings there was a book.

[6 : 46] And among lots of other things, he'd written this. After all his adventures, after all he'd seen, after all the places he'd gone to, after leaving everything to go off by himself and work out what is life all about, he had written in the margins of this book, happiness only real if shared.

Happiness only real if shared. It's a striking story, a striking conclusion, as Chris McCandless died alone, a long way from anyone, as he paid a huge price, the ultimate price, to make that discovery.

And yet that is what this chapter of Ecclesiastes is getting at, and has been telling humanity for thousands of years. That's what chapter four, as we said, adds to the equation of Ecclesiastes and what we've seen so far, which is to say this, that if you really want to live life as it's designed to be lived, if you really want satisfaction, if you want to live in line with reality, if you want happiness, that has to involve other people and relating to them and their lives properly, as well as just our own situation.

So that's what we're going to see this morning. As I said earlier, such an incredibly relevant and crucial topic for us in the day and age in which we live. I hope we'll see that as we work through these verses.

What I think we've got in this chapter is two ways that humans fail to do that. These are kind of like warning lights. Don't be in this category. Don't be in this category. This is kind of humanity in opposition to one another.

[8 : 35] And then thirdly, we're given this positive picture of how God does call us to live with one another in partnership together. So let's have a look through those pictures.

The first picture is in verses one to three. And again, as I said, this is person versus person. This is all about oppression and the powerful in particular, oppressing the weak and the alone.

And the attitude here is seeing people as worthless. So that's our first picture here, oppression and seeing people as worthless. Do have a look at verse one.

It says this, and I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun and behold the tears of the oppressed and they had no one to comfort them. On the side of their oppressors, there was power and there was no one to comfort them.

The preacher observes the way of approaching life, of approaching other people, really as if they had no value at all.

[9 : 41] The kind of approach to life that he's seeing here, it says that, you know, if you have this much power and other people have this much power, if you're able to do whatever you want, even though that might harm other people, even though it might result in tears for them, as he says, well, who cares?

This world is dog eat dog. What can I get? It's survival of the fittest. The preacher observes this oppression where people are seen as worthless.

And again, here's a great example, isn't it, of how contemporary Ecclesiastes is. You don't need me to explain these verses to you and say, well, what used to happen a long time ago is that the powerful and the rich people would use the less fortunate who didn't have the same resources just to get their own way.

You don't need that explaining because that is something that we hear about every day in our world today. The last World Cup in Qatar, it's reckoned that thousands of migrant workers died or were injured in the run-up to that because of unsafe working conditions.

FIFA gets its billions of dollars Qatar gets its reputation boosted, it's paid for, and it is those with nothing, the poor with no support, the powerless who are alone who pay the ultimate price for that.

[11 : 04] Or it can be a lot closer to home, can't it? Government statistics estimate that around 130,000 people are trapped in modern-day slavery today in the United Kingdom.

a significant portion of those being children. People with nothing, being treated as nothing by those who consider themselves worthless, tools to be used so that the powerful can make more money.

Ecclesiastes is not a distant world, is it? It's our world. It's our country. And actually, I think if we're honest, it's part of us as well. Because for all of us, how easy is it when we have the power over other people?

Maybe that's a kind of an official authority that we have through a title at work. Maybe that's a kind of a power or an authority that simply comes through a kind of a natural confidence that is part of our personality.

Maybe it's something that comes through being part of a bigger group where you know other people will share your ideas and back you up and you get kind of power that way. How easy is it for us when we find ourselves with that sort of power and influence simply to use it to get what we want, to get our way without thinking of or perhaps deliberately ignoring the cost to others.

[12 : 25] Ultimately, although the scale might be far smaller, it's that same root cause of seeing others as worthless. And when we think of the world that way, when we think of what's going on, whether that is large scale or small scale, that's a really ugly picture, isn't it?

This dehumanizing of people. And that's exactly what this passage says. It's really strong language. It says, if this is what the world is really like, if this is all there is, if it's just people versus people, people are as worthless.

Then verse two, the preacher says, I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. You'd be better off dead. Or verse three, you'd be better still never born at all.

These are incredibly strong words, aren't they? Shocking words for us to hear. And the point of the shock that the preacher wants to make is to show us how seriously the Bible takes this kind of thing.

Now that however upset we might rightly get by seeing things where human life is treated as cheap or disposable by those who have the power to do that. However upset maybe that makes us that God is more grieved, that God is more angry about that than we are.

[13 : 46] Because the Bible opens with an incredibly different picture in Genesis chapter one where humanity, male and female, are made in the image of God.

The Bible tells us that humanity has great dignity. That is where our worth is found. It doesn't matter in the Bible scheme of things if you have absolutely nothing. There is still that value and worth in human's life.

And it's when, as humanity, we forget that, we turn away from that. And the powerful try and use the weak as if they're worth nothing. Ecclesiastes is saying that people might be thinking that they're getting ahead and profiting and gaining, that things are going well for them.

But it says, actually, you'd be better off not born because you're making life not worth living because it is going precisely against the grain of the universe as God has created it.

And so that's problem number one. Person versus person. Oppression. People as worthless. We see the ugliness, the hopelessness of that approach to life. But that approach to life is just like the picture we observe in our world all around us.

[15 : 00] Something that the Bible is fully aware of that God is not turning a blind eye to. And we'll come back at the end to see, well, what is the answer to that attitude? But that's picture number one.

Picture number two we then see as verse four moves on to another example of the problem. Another example of this person versus person mindset. So we've seen oppression and people as worthless.

Next here from verse four, the context is work and people as competition. I think you get that summarized in verse four. Then I saw that all toil and skill in work come from man's envy of his neighbor.

This also is vanity and striving after the wind. The preacher says, look, here's another example of how you can miss out on how life is supposed to be lived in relation to other people.

And it's thinking of other people as opponents, as competition, where the goal of life is to work to get more than the next guy and to give everything to that end.

[16 : 09] And the next couple of verses explain it in a little bit more detail. Verse five, the fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. That's one of those kind of verses where you kind of stop and you think, what's that talking about?

I think what it's saying there is if you just do no work, it's talking about the person who's lazy, who just kind of folds his hands and doesn't do anything, then you end up with nothing to eat but yourself is kind of the picture.

The point is that, again, as we've seen previously, work is not the problem. That it's good to work. That God creates work. That the preacher is not advocating for laziness and doing nothing.

God creates work. The problem is when work becomes God. Verse six, better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after the wind.

Life is not defined by work. Better to have less than commit everything to work but again, never be satisfied. One writer puts it like this, there are limits to what work will give you so there should be limits to what you give work because if we get that wrong and when we get our focus in the wrong place it leads to a life where work is everything and people are forgotten and that's outlined in verse eight, isn't it?

[17 : 33] There's a kind of progression here. Verse eight, he says, there's no end to his toil and his eyes are never satisfied with riches so that he never asks for whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure.

This also is vanity and an unhappy business. This picture here, motivated by envy, working just for ourselves to get all that we can to get more than the next person.

Where does it lead? Well, verse eight, it is an unhappy business, says the preacher. How many of us know that, have seen that in our lives or have seen that in the lives of those around us where so much is sacrificed on the altar of work so that we can get ahead, so that we can gain relative to others, where the standard of living that we expect is gauged from what the world around us has or says we need and our life is consumed by work to pay the mortgage or to go on holiday or to get the next thing.

But the preacher here is really kind of ringing the alarm bell that says be careful because there is no end to that cycle because people never get off that treadmill.

They never say, yes, I've got enough now. I'm just going to sit back. I can just relax now. It's like a running race, constantly having to be at maximum speed, maximum effort so you don't get left behind because it is seeing people, the people in our lives all around us as competition that we have to keep up with or get ahead of.

[19 : 10] Now it's really important to say some people, many people, people here are working incredibly hard to make ends meet or in jobs that demand a lot of them.

Important here, the issue is not work. It is not hard work. It is not doing well at work. It is the motivation for work. The preacher is warning against a life of work motivated by envy to fund our personal desires to get ahead of people rather than to bless people.

It's that approach to life that means you can't or you struggle to celebrate other people's victories or successes because all you're thinking is that they're getting further ahead in the competition of life.

You're racing along, putting in all your effort but never satisfied. Again, the preacher is telling us here that is not how life is designed to be lived.

That is not the route to happiness. If we are defining ourselves from comparison with others, if we think our worth is based on what we have compared to the person next to us, we will spend our whole lives incredibly busy, our whole lives unsatisfied and ultimately our whole lives separated from others and in competition against them.

[20 : 34] And again, the preacher is showing us we will not find our joy there even if we win that race. It will be like striving after the wind. It will be a breath, something that we cannot hold on to.

And so we see here that the preacher has observed, has unpacked, I think, so much of what we see around us in the world, so much if we're honest, that we're tempted to as well.

This idea of person versus person, either other people are worthless to be used, ignored, trampled, whatever, to get our way or to get where we want to go. Or people as competition, opponents that we have to keep up with or have more than, life as a race to make sure that we are up at the top.

But he says, life with that is not worth living. You're better off born. Life like that is not joyful. It is an unhappy business, verse 8. So then what is the answer? What is the path to the good life?

Well, we see that then laid out for us next, the third picture in verses 9 down to 12. And the answer that the preacher gives is rather than person versus person, is person with person.

[21 : 49] Not people as worthless, not people as competition, but people as partners. And so let me read those verses, verses 9 to 12. Do follow along. Worth saying, before we read those, if you've heard these verses before, it might well be that you've heard them at a wedding, and that's great.

But important, before we read these verses, that is not ultimately, not primarily, what these verses are speaking about. This is not verses about marriage. These are verses about friendship.

These are verses about community. These are verses about being with people rather than against them. Verses 9 to 12, the preacher says, two are better than one because they have a good reward for their toil.

For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?

And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. The preacher's point here is simply to say that we are designed to go through life together.

[23 : 04] We are able, you know, the examples he gives, we're able to work together. We're able to help one another. We're able to look after each other. We're able to protect each other.

When we see that actually others have value in our lives. There are things we're able to do as community that we cannot do as individuals. The good life is a shared life with others because we were designed to be together.

And again, this is going right back to the opening chapters of Genesis. God makes the man, Adam. But then he says in chapter two, it is not good that the man should be alone.

I will make a helper for him. Right from the beginning, humanity is designed to work together, person with person. And so as the question comes, if that's how we're made, why does this person versus person attitude come so naturally?

Again, if we read on into Genesis chapter three, we see that because sin comes into our world, we pull apart and humanity becomes against each other in all of the various ways that we've already seen in this chapter of Ecclesiastes, that the preacher is saying that that natural way of being adversarial toward others, that is not the good life.

[24 : 26] That is life broken by sin. And so, the question we ask is, what do we do about it then? How do we get rid of of humanity, of our natural tendency not to live in partnership?

Because if we're honest, loads of people would say, yes, we need to value each other, we need to work together, hostility between people is bad. That's not a message that's unique to the church.

That's sort of standard Facebook or social media kind of wisdom. Loads of people saying, oh, we need to be kind to each other, look out for each other. But if that is so common, if that is what people think, why do we see so much separation around us?

And why does it come so naturally to ourselves as well? And I think the reason is because that partnership is so much easier said than done. It is so much easier to say, we should all get on together.

And yet actually, society doesn't give us the resources to get on together. Because at the same time as telling us that, our world is constantly telling us to compare ourselves to one another.

[25 : 38] That our worth, our value is dependent on how much better or worse or more or less that we have than those around us. Our world is constantly telling us that we are number one and we need to love ourselves despite the consequences to other people.

We need to do what is right for us, what is best for us. And so in this idea of being together, we see how society kind of preaches one thing, but it practices and it points us in a direction of something very different.

It tells us we should be together while encouraging us to find our place in opposition to one another. And that is where we see then the unique message of Christianity and how it's only the gospel that can help here.

because the Bible says that is the only thing that can really unite people together in partnership, Jesus Christ and the good news of the gospel because it's as we consider the gospel that as we were saying early on in our service that God himself came into the world to die for broken people and not just me but for other people as well, the people we see in our day-to-day lives.

when we think about that, we see there that people are not worthless but individuals have an incredible value to God.

[27 : 03] How dare we kind of use and abuse and look down on those about whom God says, I will send my only son, I myself will come to rescue.

It says we look to Jesus, we find for ourselves that our identity, our worth isn't based then on how much we have in comparison to other people whether that's in terms of possessions, whether that's in terms of job titles or exam results or where we rank on some sort of social ladder.

No, our identity when we look to the gospel is that we are people who are loved by Jesus, that he has demonstrated that love in the gospel where Jesus dies for our sins.

It's the gospel and looking to Jesus that enables us to find the good life life as it's designed to be lived. Not a solo life, not life in opposition to others, with others as worthless or others as competition, but rather life together, helping, supporting, encouraging one another.

Able to celebrate each other's successes rather than try and pull each other down. Lifting people up when they fall rather than using that as a chance to kind of run ahead.

[28 : 16] and a good life is life lived in partnership with others and that doesn't mean that we're defined by what others think. We're not defined by our relationships.

I think that's what verses 13 to 16 are all about, although I'm not 100% sure, but we have here kind of in those last few verses like the ultimate rags to riches story. The boy with nothing becomes the king, leading countless people.

It's the kind of story that Disney would be all over and making the film or the cartoon version. And yet, the close of this chapter, verse 16, those who follow will not rejoice in him.

I think it's saying even that huge kind of success, that relational success is ultimately fleeting. And so when we look to the gospel, this doesn't mean that we become defined by our relationships.

That too would be that chasing after the wind, trying to hold on to that which is outside of our control. But it's when we look to Jesus, that we are able to build good relationships because the gospel of Jesus truly changes everything, including how we relate to each other, not worthless and not competition, but united in Christ.

[29 : 28] Life together as it was designed from the beginning. And a great place for us to finish with this, really kind of the great application of this as we close is simply to think about the church as we are united to God through Christ.

We are united to one another and the visible outworking of that is the very normal, average local church, which is God's plan for his people.

The church is the place where most of all we should see people as partners to support one another through life. The church is the place where selfish ambition or ugly competition that never satisfies should go to die because the church is a place that is all about the gospel.

And I know that it doesn't always get that right, but we shouldn't be satisfied with less than that because our partnership, God's people together, is both the fruit of the gospel but also a witness to the gospel and all that God has done.

James Bannerman, a Scottish theologian of the 19th century, writes this, that the church more than the Christian, the society more than the individual, is set forth to us as the highest and most glorious embodiment and manifestation of divine power and grace upon the earth.

[30 : 55] That's an incredible thing, isn't it, to be said about a gathering like us this morning. The church, God's people together, is this incredible thing brought together by the gospel to witness the truth of the gospel.

Maybe that's a wake-up call for all of us. I think it's easy for us to be just as individualistic within the church as the world outside is. But Ecclesiastes chapter 4 is here to remind us that the good life is a life lived taking seriously the reality that we live in relation to one another.

We can do that badly and it will lead to hurt, to oppression, to a lack of satisfaction. We can do that well as we, and only as we look to the gospel, see our need of Jesus and the work he has done for us, for me, on the cross.

And through that, love one another well, living as an encouragement and support as we walk through life in partnership with one another, helping, encouraging, building up, sacrificially serving in order to represent the gospel to the world for the glory of God.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you again for your word, the Bible.

[32 : 17] We thank you that it speaks wisdom. We thank you that it takes seriously the realities of our life, of the world, including humanity, which you created perfect and which continues to have real beauty and value, but which is also stained by sin, which causes that ugliness we see around us in the world and also in our relationships.

Lord, we ask that you would help us to relate well to those around us. We pray that we would see people not as worthless, but recognize the value and dignity that others have, that we would see people not as competition to get ahead of, but rather we would look to encourage and support one another, being able to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice, recognizing that you have created humanity to live in partnership together.

And Lord, we know our weakness, we know our own hearts, we know our tendency just to want to get ahead of others, whatever the cost to them, we know our temptation just to put ourselves first and seek after what we want.

And Lord, we need the gospel of Jesus Christ to change us and to bring us new hearts. Lord, please help us to look back time and time again to what you have done for us.

Please help us to rest in your grace and love for us. And through that, that love that we receive but we do not deserve, would we be able to show that grace and love to others as well?

[33 : 54] And Lord, we pray especially within the church that you would protect our unity, that the care that we have for one another would be genuine from hearts shaped by the gospel and that care in itself would be a witness to our community pointing to the far greater care and the perfect love of Jesus and the hope that he and he alone offers.

We pray all of these things in his precious name. Amen.