

# Without Friends Like These, Who Needs Economies?

Ecclesiastes 4:4-16    September 4, 2024

Three months ago, *Financial Times* published an article titled, “America’s Crisis Of Loneliness.”<sup>1</sup> In it they discuss what they call a “a pervasive sense of anxiety and an emotional hollowing out.” Then they ask how we should define “the good life.” Their conclusion is that the best way to happiness is to first cross a certain middle-class, economic threshold - meaning a certain amount of money and security and stuff - and *then* you’re able to be happy with family, friends and community.

But pursuit of big piles of economic stuff has been central to the American culture for hundreds of years. We’re one of the richest nations in all human history. Yet when American’s are polled, their happiness erodes more every year.<sup>2</sup> Less than *half* of American’s say their are satisfied with their lives.<sup>3</sup> Sixty percent say they are lonely on a regular basis and research is starting to reveal that loneliness is actually killing us with increased stroke, dementia, and heart disease.<sup>4</sup>

In his quest for meaning, the Teacher just took a tour of the halls of justice. He left brokenhearted because of the *injustice* he found there. He headed out into the highways and city squares to see if peace and satisfaction might be found there.

He discovered a society not unlike our own - where many people are convinced that wealth is the way to happiness - but also a pervasive unhappiness among the wealthy.

Tonight, the Teacher warns us about the dangers of isolation and individualism and the pursuit of wealth. After the warning, he gives us the *better* path.

**Ecclesiastes 4:4 - 4 I saw that all labor and all skillful work is due to one person’s jealousy of another. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind.**

The Teacher is speaking hyperbolically.<sup>5</sup> After all, in an earlier passage he told us that work is a gift given by God for our enjoyment.<sup>6</sup> His is describing a culture like ours - one driven by accumulation. Keeping up with the Joneses. Having the motivational picture of the yacht on your desk because *that’s* what you’re working for.

The mindset he’s talking about is why credit cards exist.<sup>7</sup> And what he’s describing are things that are really fundamental to the American culture. Competition. Building self-worth by outperforming others. Striving for superiority in position or accolades or possessions.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/95081317-dabf-4adf-8f66-642af1b40750>

<sup>2</sup> <https://thehill.com/opinion/4568301-why-are-americans-so-unhappy/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/610133/less-half-americans-satisfied-own-lives.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-americans-are-lonelier-and-its-effects-on-our-health>

<sup>5</sup> Choon-Leong Seow *Ecclesiastes*

<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiastes 2:24

<sup>7</sup> Philip Ryken *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*

Now, those characteristics make for a thriving economy and lots of innovation. But we shouldn't make the same mistake the Teacher made all those years and forget the spiritual side of things.

God's Word warns us that jealous is rottenness to our very bones.<sup>8</sup> That envy is a fatal disease.<sup>9</sup> If we give ourselves over to working just to accumulate or just to outperform or just toward the end goal of our own glory, *that* kind of labor is hevel. It's like trying to grab onto smoke. *And* it's going to destroy your relationships.<sup>10</sup>

Ok, so then one might conclude, don't worry about work. Just enjoy *being*, not *doing*.

### **Ecclesiastes 4:5 - <sup>5</sup>The fool folds his arms and consumes his own flesh.**

Yikes. Didn't know you were in for a little self-cannibalism tonight, did you?

In the Wisdom books, there's nothing worse than a fool. On the one hand, the Teacher says, "It's *futile* to work for wealth." On the other hand he says, "It's *foolish* not to work." Either route is destructive to a heart and life.

So, what can we do? It seems like there's no way to win. And that's *exactly* what the Teacher wants us to understand: Under the sun, there's no method that gives you meaning in life and lasting satisfaction. We need to break *out* of the system by living life the way *God* intends. So, the Teacher shows us the way out.

### **Ecclesiastes 4:6 - <sup>6</sup>Better one handful with rest than two handfuls with effort and a pursuit of the wind.**

God has given you your life as a gift. He gives you specific work to do, *also* as a gift but according to *His* purposes. And when we live and work according to the prescription and administration of God our Maker, life not only fills up with meaning, we can *enjoy* it along the way.

The Teacher is going to use the word *better* three times in our verses tonight. This is the first. It means good, desirable, you-do-well-if-you-do-this.<sup>11</sup> You want to live "the good life?" Do this.

The first detour sign toward the *better* way of life is here: One handful with rest.

When we live life the way God intends, we are able to receive something the Under-The-Sunners can't: Rest. Peace. Satisfaction. Your version may say "quietness." It means the absence of disturbance.<sup>12</sup> The Bible word for it is *contentment*. As Paul told Timothy, Godliness with contentment is *great gain*. Way more valuable than a COLA next year or a dividend payout.

---

<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 14:30

<sup>9</sup> Job 5:2

<sup>10</sup> James Smith *The Wisdom Literature And Psalms*

<sup>11</sup> *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary Of Old And New Testament Words*

<sup>12</sup> *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*

The image here is a contrast between two people. In fact, the Hebrew uses two different terms for “hands” in this verse.<sup>13</sup> The first person has an open hand, ready to receive a gift into it. Not grabby. Not greedy. Not demanding. The second person has both hands cupped and clenched, trying to take as much as possible for themselves.

The Teacher says the *good* life, the *better* life is the first fellow. They may appear to have less in the hand, but their hearts are filled up with contentment, whereas the second fellow’s heart is empty. The thing they’re trying to grasp is going to pass through their fingers like smoke.

### **Ecclesiastes 4:7 - <sup>7</sup>Again, I saw futility under the sun:**

Remember: These are always key words in the book of Ecclesiastes. Under the sun means life according to human wisdom, with human ideals, and natural values. Futility is that most important word *hevel*, which means smoke, vapor, a wisp that’s there and gone.

**Ecclesiastes 4:8 - <sup>8</sup>There is a person without a companion, without even a son or brother, and though there is no end to all his struggles, his eyes are still not content with riches. “Who am I struggling for,” he asks, “and depriving myself of good things?” This too is futile and a miserable task.**

This is Ebenezer Scrooge before his fateful night with the three ghosts. It’s every workaholic, whether they actually have kids or not. This person has allowed their pursuit of success to rob him of companionship, family, and other relationships.

In the end, he’s rich in the world’s goods, but impoverished when it comes to love, support, and affection. Where’s the profit? Where’s the real meaning? Death destroys all that kind of success.

Howard Hughes was one of the most successful and important men in his millennium. When he died, there was no one to leave his vast fortune to. It took 34 years to settle his estate. His billions was split between 22 legal cousins, many of whom he never knew.<sup>14</sup> What a tragedy! But heed his example and the Teacher’s point: Living for the wrong reasons will shipwreck our lives in the end.

**Ecclesiastes 4:9 - <sup>9</sup>Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts.**

Here’s our second *better* of the night. It is better to invest in *people*. It’s not only because God made us to be relational and communal beings, it actually benefits *us* to have relationships. When you partner with others, when you have meaningful relationship with them, you *both* are rewarded. And in the following verses we see a list of some of those benefits and rewards.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Eaton *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction And Commentary*

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.dandblaw.com/blog/howard-hughes-outer-limits/>

Bible dictionaries point out that the word he uses for “reward” can also mean “wages.”<sup>15</sup> So there’s the Scrooge in verse 8, working so hard to pile up wealth but he goes to his end alone - relationally bankrupt. Instead, the *better* life is to partner with people. Yes, that takes away from your ability to spend all your time amassing physical wealth, but you will be rewarded with *other* wages.

**Ecclesiastes 4:10 - <sup>10</sup> For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up.**

In calamity, disaster, or injury, having a friend might literally save your life. Or it might keep you from having to saw your own arm off when you fall into a canyon.<sup>16</sup>

But it’s not just about physical slips. Fellow Christians can help us when we have a moral fall as well.<sup>17</sup> That can be a difficult thing to do, but it is a calling and command given to us in Galatians, to restore those who fall into sin or error with gentleness.<sup>18</sup>

**Ecclesiastes 4:11 - <sup>11</sup> Also, if two lie down together, they can keep warm; but how can one person alone keep warm?**

This *could* refer to marriage, but the Teacher is not talking about a romantic lying down here.<sup>19</sup> In those ancient times, travelers would sleep next to one another on the trail, using both their cloaks as blankets and their body heat shared to protect from the elements.

This applies more widely to supporting one another through adversity, temptation, grief.<sup>20</sup>

This image shows us that even if we don’t have enough to build a whole bonfire, we still have enough to give warmth to others in a cold world.<sup>21</sup> Remember, it’s not about stuff.

**Ecclesiastes 4:12 - <sup>12</sup> And if someone overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken.**

It’s not just the dangerous pitfalls along the way or the harsh elements of travel. Now we see active aggressors - enemies or thieves targeting us. In that situation, it’s good to have a friend - even better to have more!

In 1986, an old man in *The Legend Of Zelda* famously told players, “It’s dangerous to go alone, take this!” and then gave them a sword. The Teacher is telling us, “Life is too dangerous to live alone. Maintain relationships with other people who are living life God’s way. When you do, you’ll be rewarded and *you* become a reward for others.” There is strength in principled community.

---

<sup>15</sup> TWOT

<sup>16</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/127\\_Hours](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/127_Hours)

<sup>17</sup> Smith

<sup>18</sup> Galatians 6:1

<sup>19</sup> Ronald Murphy *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 23: Ecclesiastes*

<sup>20</sup> Eaton

<sup>21</sup> Duane Garrett *The New American Commentary, Volume 14: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song Of Songs*

As the chapter closes, the Teacher shares a parable. Commentators have a hard time parsing exactly what he meant, but in general we're going to see how human relationships impact not just individuals but whole empires.

**Ecclesiastes 4:13-14** - <sup>13</sup> **Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer pays attention to warnings.** <sup>14</sup> **For he came from prison to be king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom.**

This is our third *better*. Again, he says that *position* or *prominence* is not as important as *disposition* of the heart and mind, even at the national level. These principles scale up.

In this parable, we have a king who started off in humble circumstances. He was poor and did some jail time, probably not for crimes - back then prisons had more to do with debts and politics<sup>22</sup> - but through cunning, hard work, and wisdom, he became king. Unfortunately, in his old age, he allowed his relationships to die. He decided he was self-sufficient. Now a *new* youth who *is* willing to hear wisdom and warnings rises up to challenge the old king.

**Ecclesiastes 4:15** - <sup>15</sup> **I saw all the living, who move about under the sun, follow a second youth who succeeds him.**

The old king stopped doing the better thing and *that* isolation bred folly. The people no longer had relationship with the old king, despite his former success, and so they turn to a new leader.

But, watch out: The parable isn't over.

**Ecclesiastes 4:16** - <sup>16</sup> **There is no limit to all the people who were before them, yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind.**

*There's* the Teacher we've come to know. He says, "Yes, the young man did the *better* thing, but then *he* eventually gets old and loses touch and the he gets caught in the gears, too." Just when we think we have a *system* figured out to make everything work right, the *hevel* of life under the sun takes over. Because people are fickle. And none of us are perfect at doing the *better* thing.

There are a lot of warnings in this text that leave us in tension. Don't be a workaholic, but don't be a lazybones. Make and maintain relationships for your own good, but realize that even then you're not guaranteed you won't fall into a pit or be attacked or that people won't become fickle and give their affection to someone else someday.

The important thing for us is to understand how *God* looks at our lives. We've got to ignore what our culture says is important, or how the world around us values work. Instead, we need to remember that God has given life as a gift, He gives each of us work to do for His purposes, for His

---

<sup>22</sup> Seow

glory, and for our enjoyment. And He has made us to be unified with other people who walk with us on this path.

We're *not* supposed to live in competition. Not with the Joneses, not with the guy in the next cubicle, not with the church down the street. And though isolation can be *easier* in the short-run, it's deadly in the end.

The Lord knows we *need* community and family and friendships. Think of how many arrangements God has established for us so that we can have the connections we need: Family, friendship, neighborhoods, the Church, nations, countless associations. From the beginning, the Lord said, "It is not good for man to be alone." And then He started providing these points of meaningful connection.

And here's something remarkable: Friendship is the one area of human life that the Teacher never labels *hevel*.<sup>23</sup>

But, there's always going to be a tension, even among Christians who share the same values, because none of us are perfect. And life is full of pressures and problems. And we're still moving around under the sun, and therefore are impacted by time, death, and chance, not to mention our own mistakes.

What the Teacher is sharing with us is the better way: Better ways of working, better ways of relating, better ways of valuing our efforts and ordering our loves. Trust God, walk His way, receive the blessings of purpose, satisfaction, and contentment that He wants for you.

---

<sup>23</sup> CSB Study Bible: Notes