

The Bonfire of the Vanities “Chasing After the Wind” Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

Introduction

- [Slide #1] Having come to the fourth chapter of this book I think it would be wise to pause and take stock of where we’ve come so far in this journey with Qoheleth, or the Teacher. The Teacher is on a quest, right? He’s in search of an answer to the one question we all want answered. What is the meaning of life?
- There is an underlying assumption that runs throughout this book. Ecclesiastes 5:2. *God is in heaven. And you are on earth.* The underlying assumption is that there is meaning. Life has meaning. But only if God is in the picture. If God is out of the picture, if it’s just life *under the sun*, life without God—you won’t find meaning anywhere. All you’ll find are vanities. The Teacher’s concludes life without God has no meaning. Ecclesiastes 1:2. *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."*
- Again, the word *meaningless* means “that which is unsubstantial” and comes from the word breath or vapor.¹ The word is suggestive of something that doesn’t endure. In other words, there is no meaning in this life under the sun because all the things can and do pursue, all the things we think have meaning, are vaporous. They don’t endure. They are dead ends. It’s vain to pursue them.
- Now to chapter 4. Chapter 4 describes the fruit, the net result of pursuing meaning in life without God, apart from him. And it isn’t pretty. I think the big picture idea of chapter 4 is this...[Slide #2]

Proposition

- **The vanities of life produce loneliness**
- The net result of chasing after the wind, of chasing after things that don’t endure, is an erosion of relationships. The picture of life presented in Ecclesiastes 4 is one of loneliness. It’s what [The Beatles](#) describe in their song.
 - Eleanor Rigby picks up the rice in the church where her wedding has been
Lives in a dream
Waits at the window, wearing a face that she keeps in a jar by the door
Who is it for?
 - All the lonely people
Where do they all come from?
All the lonely people
Where do they all belong?
- Except where [The Beatles](#) leave the question unanswered Qoheleth, the Teacher, has an answer. Where do all the lonely people come from? The more we pursue the vaporous vanities of life, the more we chase after the wind, the more our relationships suffer, the more

¹ C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, p. 191-2.

alone we become. **The vanities of life produce loneliness.** And because most of us, me included, continue to try to find meaning in this life apart from God, we continue to suffer through life with a gripping, debilitating sense of loneliness.

- **Mother Theresa** once said, “The biggest disease today is not leprosy or cancer. It's the feeling of being uncared for, unwanted-of being deserted and alone.”² I wonder how many of you here this morning feel deserted and alone in this life under the sun?
- In June of 2006 the **National Opinion Research Center** at the University of Chicago, released a study that concluded Americans now have less people they can confide in than previous generations. In 1985, the average American had three people in whom to confide matters that were important to them. In 2004, that number dropped to two. The study also concluded the number of Americans with no close friends rose from 10 percent in 1985 to 24.6 percent in 2004.³ We are a nation of loners.
- What I think Ecclesiastes 4 suggests is that this condition of loneliness is man-made. It is part of life under the sun, life here on earth, but it is not natural. We produce this loneliness by our actions; by the way we live, by what we chase after.

Transition

There are in this chapter...

Organizational Sentence

- **Five pictures of loneliness produced by our chasing after the wind**

Transition

The **first** comes in **verses 1-3**. Look at Ecclesiastes 4:1-3. Listen. *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. 2 And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. 3 But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.* [Slide #3] First picture is the **loneliness in the face of oppressive power**.

Main Points

- At first glance it looks as if the subject of **verses 1-3** is oppression. And certainly oppressive power is mentioned. However, as the Teacher observes *all the oppression taking place under the sun*, he notices something particular about the people being oppressed. End of **verse 1**. *They have no comforter*. Those being oppressed are all alone. I think what troubles the Teacher more than the oppression itself, which is troubling enough, is the absence of a humane response to all the suffering he sees.⁴ *I saw the tears of the oppressed. They have no comforter*.
- You think about all the places around the world where people are suffering under oppressive regimes. Cuba, Libya, Myanmar, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan. Think of all the oppressive marriages where husbands are abusing their power and dominating their wives and children. Those situations in and of themselves are tragic.

² Mother Teresa, *Leadership*, Vol. 1, no. 4.

³ Janet Kornblum, "Study: 25 Percent of Americans Have No One to Confide In," *USA Today* (6-23-06).

⁴ Fox, p. 218.

Absolutely tragic. But what's even worse is that no one comes to the aid of those in need. *I saw the tears of the oppressed.* They are alone in their oppression. *They have no comforter.*

- The Teacher is so disturbed by this loneliness in the face of oppression that he says in [verse 2](#), *and I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living, who are still alive. 3 But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.*
- This world is full of evil. But what is so tragic about our lives under the sun, on this earth, is that this loneliness in the face of oppression is so avoidable. We can't fix every evil. We can't fix every oppressive situation. But we can comfort someone in need. We can offer our tears and weep with those who weep. How tragic that we compound the evil around us by failing to comfort those in need. Beware of being blinded to the tears of others by your chase, your pursuit of those vapors, those things which are ultimately unsubstantial.

Transition

Look at [verses 4-6](#) and the [second picture](#) of loneliness. [[Slide #4](#)] It's a picture of loneliness [produced by jealous ambition](#). *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. 5 The fool folds his hands and ruins himself. 6 Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.*

- I don't know if you've ever thought about your work like this but [verses 4-6](#) suggest that the reason we work so hard, the reason we are so driven and ambitious, the reason we burn the candle at both ends, is because, deep down, we are envious. *And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor.* Others have more, have better, have newer and we have to keep up.
- But keeping up is not all its cracked up to be. In the words of funnyman [Jim Carrey](#), "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer."⁵
- Being driven and ambitious comes at a cost. Usually the cost is relational—we run roughshod over people. A number of years ago, the ambitious [Jimmy Johnson](#), when he was first hired by the Dallas Cowboys, divorced his wife telling reporters she no longer fits "into my game plan."
- Too many families are run into the ground because the husband or the wife or both are running to keep up. Too many students miss out on the rich friendships of school because they are trying to outshine their peers and get ahead. The child is sacrificed at the altar of work. The spouse is neglected because of this pressure to achieve and succeed. Our ambition drives us away from people and into the arms of loneliness. Some of the most unhappy people I've ever met are the most ambitious. They have accomplished everything in the world but have nothing that matters. The Teacher says their jealous ambition is *chasing after the wind*.
- Of course, the opposite, [verse 5](#), is no good either. *The fool folds his hands and ruins himself.* Literally, it reads he *consumes his own flesh*. The impoverished lazy fool

⁵ "Quotable Quotes," *Readers Digest* (March 2006); submitted to preachingtoday.com by Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky

cannibalizes himself with his idleness.⁶ Neither of them, the overly ambitious or the idle fool, are normally graced with companionship in this life. Both suffer loneliness. The middle ground is better. **Verse 6.** *Better one handful with tranquillity than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.*

Transition

Look at **verses 7-8**. The **third picture** of loneliness. [Slide #5] The loneliness here is **produced by greed**. *Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: 8 There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. "For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless-- a miserable business!*

- The Teacher sees something else in **verses 7-8**. He paints for us the picture of a man who has absolutely no human relationships of any kind.⁷ And the reason for this man's loneliness is his greed. He never ceases working, **verse 8**. *There was no end to his toil*. Why? Because he is never satisfied with what he has. *Yet his eyes were not content with his wealth*. His greed, his pursuit, his *miserable business* of chasing after the wind has robbed him of all relational connections. He is utterly alone in the world.
- I love how **The Message** translates these two verses. *I turned my head and saw yet another wisp of smoke on its way to nothingness: a solitary person, completely alone—no children, no family, no friends—yet working obsessively late into the night, compulsively greedy for more and more, never bothering to ask, "Why am I working like a dog, never having any fun? And who cares?" More smoke. A bad business.*
- So much of the loneliness we suffer through during this life under the sun, we bring upon ourselves. We do it to ourselves by the way we live, by the choices we make, by what we chase after. **The vanities of life**, if we give ourselves to chasing after these things, things that are unsubstantial, things that don't matter, they will **produce loneliness** in our lives. What kinds of relationships or lack thereof have you produced so far in your life?

Transition

Clearly, companionship is better than isolation, which is the **fourth picture** the Teacher gives us in **verses 9-12**.⁸ [Slide #6] **Loneliness reversed by companionship**. Listen. *Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: 10 If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! 11 Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? 12 Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*

- Other than chapter 3, these four verses are some of the most recognized in the Bible. Mostly you hear this section at weddings. But marriage is not the central point. The central point is companionship of all kinds. Whether you're working, **verse 9**, stuck in a ditch, **verse 10**, need to keep warm while traveling, **verse 11**, or waylaid by bandits, **verse 12**, companionship reverses the debilitating effects of loneliness.
- Taken from his book *There's a Lot More to Health Than Not Being Sick*, **Bruce Larson** tells of the early days of settling this country when the government would give away quarter

⁶ Fox, p. 220.

⁷ Longman, p. 140.

⁸ Longman, p. 142.

sections of land to anyone who would homestead. People flocked west from crowded cities for their own piece of land. But before they could farm their first job was to build a house. And most families built them right smack-dab in the middle of their quarter section. The reason was obvious. People who had never owned land before had a new sense of pride and ownership. They wanted to feel that everything they saw belonged to them.

- But that custom changed quickly. This chosen isolation did strange things to people. Occasionally, photographers went out to record life on the frontier and returned with photographs of weird men, wild-eyed women, and haunted-looking children. Before long most of these families learned to move their houses to one corner of their property to live in proximity with three other families who also lived on the corners of their property. Four families living together, sharing life and death, joy and sorrow, abundance and want, had a good chance of making it.⁹ *Two are better than one. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*
- We may not live on the frontier any more but we are certainly no less lonely. You'd think we'd have figured things out by now. All around us are wild-eyed, haunted people starved for relationships, suffering in aloneness. As [Three Dog Night](#) put it, "One is the loneliest number that you'll ever do." But that loneliness is unnatural and avoidable. We won't make it through this life without some kind of companionship—some kind of significant relational connection.

Transition

Look at [verses 13-16](#). I want to spend just a second here before trying to summarize what I think the Teacher would have us do in response to the loneliness of life under the sun. Listen. *Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning. 14 The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. 15 I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. 16 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.* The last picture is of **loneliness produced by pride**. [[Slide #7](#)]

- The picture the Teacher gives in this last section is of a lonely king isolated by pride. [Verse 13](#). He no longer listens to advice; the foolish king *no longer knows how to take warning*. And instead of enjoying his position and his people, his pride and his arrogance have isolated him from the people he rules. He's become an island in a sea of people. And in his loneliness the king watches as his kingdom slowly slips into the hands of another. [Verse 15](#). *I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor.*
- But this new guy, the new king, is no better off. He will eventually suffer the same fate as the king before him. Listen to how the [New Living Translation](#) translates [verse 16](#). *Endless crowds stand around him, [meaning the new king] but then another generation grows up and rejects him, too. So it is all meaningless—like chasing the wind.* Whether by pride or something else, the second king ends up like the first, rejected and alone. *This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*
- How much of life's loneliness is self-induced; the result of our pride?

⁹ Chuck Swindoll, *Dropping Your Guard* (Word Books, 1983), p. 23; quoting Bruce Larson, *There's a Lot More to Health Than Not Being Sick*; submitted to [preachingtoday.com](#) by Darin Reimer, Victoria, British Columbia

Conclusion

- Where do all the lonely people come from? The more we pursue the vanities of life, the more we chase after the wind, the more our relationships suffer, the more alone we become. **The vanities of life produce loneliness.**
- See, I think the purpose of Ecclesiastes 4 is to stimulate a desire for relationships. But even the Teacher would agree the best earthly relationships are insufficient. You can have all the friends in the world, the best marriage in the world, lots of kids and grandkids and still be terribly alone.
- Philosopher **Bertrand Russell** sensed this in himself. In his correspondence with his mistress **Lady Ottoline Morrell** he wrote, “The root of the whole thing is loneliness. I have a kind of physical loneliness, which almost anybody can more or less relieve, but which would be only fully relieved by a wife and children. Beyond that, I have a very internal and terrible spiritual loneliness.... I have dreamed of a combination of spiritual and physical companionship, and if I had the good fortune to find it, I could have become something better than I shall ever be.”¹⁰
- Ultimately nothing in this life under the sun can eliminate the “very internal and terrible spiritual loneliness” as Russell called it. Only God can do that. The reason for the loneliness epidemic all around us is because we choose to live life apart from God, outside of a relationship with him.
- **Aristotle** thought there could be no friendship between a god and a man, any more than a man could be a friend to his slave or his tools, because they were too dissimilar in nature. But the Bible radically rejects this idea. Few things could be more unnatural and incomprehensible than God’s willingness to become friends with mortals, with those whose lives are unsubstantial breaths. But that’s what God does. That’s what he offers. Himself. The whole plan of salvation is an act of friendship; a plan which has God taking on human likeness so that people might take on his likeness, transforming his enemies into his friends. The high point of this is Jesus’ statement to his disciples in John 15:15, ‘*No longer do I call you servants...but I have called you friends.*’¹¹ Through Jesus Christ, God’s hand is outstretched to you this morning. The choice is yours. You never have to be alone again.

¹⁰ Os Guinness, *Long Journey Home: A Guide to Your Search for the Meaning of Life* (Doubleday, 2001), pp. 3-4.

¹¹ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 308.