



Ecclesiastes

Does Life Have Meaning?

In chapter four the author of Ecclesiastes turns to a number of “better than” statements and shows some circumstances are better than others. He also shows that it is better to live in harmony with another than to be alone.

What is Better?

Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

Qoheleth now looks up and sees that “under the sun” there are many who are oppressed and have no one to comfort them. The phrase “under the sun” is used twenty-nine times in Ecclesiastes and always relates to those things done in this world with no consideration of God. In this case, Solomon sees the world as a place of injustice.

- 1. How does Qoheleth describe the oppressors in 4:1?**
- 2. What effect did the oppressors have on the oppressed?**

Qoheleth views the oppressors with such disdain that he claims it is better to be dead than to be alive and oppressed, but better still to have yet been born. The unborn is not being oppressed nor has escaped a lifetime of oppression by death. The deeds of the oppressors are called “evil” and are done “under the sun.”

It is better to be dead, and better still to be not yet born, than to be oppressed.



The next subject Solomon confronts is that of excessive toil versus slothfulness. He views those who toil skilfully and industriously with suspicion because this work is often undertaken because of envy. The one who works hard does so to keep up with or surpass his neighbour. On the other hand the fool “*folds his hands and eats his own flesh.*” Here the idea is that a lazy person just sits down and either chews on his knuckles or eats through his possessions leaving nothing behind.

- 3. What do you see in the lives of people today who are driven in their careers by envy or a desire to feel superior?**
- 4. How do we develop the proper balance between work and relaxation?**

Ecclesiastes 4:6 can be understood two ways, the first is that these words are a defence for the sluggard. He does not work and justifies himself by saying that it is better to be quiet. The second way to understand this verse is that Solomon is saying that one should avoid both the extremes of excessive toil and laziness. It is better to earn a modest living with quietness than wealth with overwork fuelled by envy or a desire to feel superior.

It is better to satisfied with a modest amount than to overwork or to be lazy.



Verse 7 addresses the wealthy man who works to acquire more and more with no satisfaction while living without companionship. He has no one to share with him perhaps because he fears others may want to take advantage of him to gain from his wealth or because he has no time to develop relationships because of his excessive labours. This man lives in isolation, but finally concludes that he is uselessly depriving himself of pleasure bringing meaninglessness and unhappiness.

5. What trouble has the pursuit of wealth brought the man in verse 8?

It is better to have companionship than to only seek to acquire wealth for oneself. Qoheleth may have in mind a business partnership where two are able to earn more than each one alone while enjoying the camaraderie and mutual support that can come through cooperation with another.

It is better to have companionship than to be alone.

Solomon may also have in mind a marriage partner. In this case the return for their toil is not just financial, but also satisfaction, contentment, and companionship.

6. What three illustrations does Solomon use to demonstrate that companionship has benefits over being alone? (4:10-12)

In verse 12, Solomon moves from talking about two to using three as an example. “A cord of three strands was the strongest made in the ancient world. Three is the number of completeness and perfection.”¹

The final comparison in chapter 4 is that of a poor and wise youth with an old and foolish king. Here we see the fleeting nature of power and influence. The old king would no longer take advice and is deposed by an unlikely person who came from the lowest level (prison and poverty) to take over the throne.

It is better to be a poor and wise youth than a foolish king who will not accept advice.

The population adored the young man who would become king. All the people who lived under the sun followed the usurper and rallied to him. The young man will eventually suffer the same fate as the old king and will lose the support of the people.

¹ Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 743.

7. Why do leaders become foolish and unable to take advice?

8. Why do new political leaders eventually suffer the same fate as the previous leaders?

All done under the sun, whether it be oppression, misuse of labour, a solitary and self-centred life, or foolish leadership all end up as vanity (*hebel*). Some circumstances in life are better than others and some choices are better. It is better to be satisfied with a modest living while enjoying companionship than to be lazy or overworked, or to be greedy or envious.