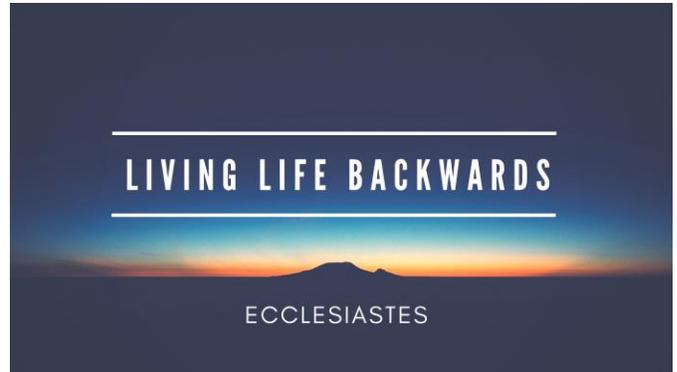


## Community Is Better

### Ecclesiastes 4

Living Life Backwards, Part 5  
Patrick Havens                      July 15, 2018



Please turn to Ecclesiastes 4. We're continuing our pursuit of wisdom. Proverbs tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Ecclesiastes ends with that same statement. So these two wisdom books are companions. We're much more used to Proverbs, where we learn that character has consequences. But in Ecclesiastes, Solomon is out in the streets with us. He shows us the darkness of life so we will look to the Lord and find joy in Him. It's a different read, but it's an important one and we can enjoy the wisdom we receive from both books.

Now we've arrived at Ecclesiastes 4 in our study. I think this is a great approach we're taking this summer and I've already learned a lot. Let's read this chapter:

*<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. <sup>3</sup> But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.*

*<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. <sup>6</sup> Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind. <sup>7</sup> Again, I saw vanity under the sun: <sup>8</sup> 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.*

*<sup>9</sup> Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. <sup>10</sup> 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! <sup>11</sup> Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? <sup>12</sup> And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.*

*<sup>13</sup> Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. <sup>14</sup> For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. <sup>15</sup> I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. <sup>16</sup> 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.*

Lord, thanks for Your Word. I pray You would illumine us. Open our eyes and hearts to You. Teach us Your ways and give us wisdom from this passage today. You know each of us individually and corporately. We're Your people. In Christ's name. Amen.

If there was any week when we might have hope for humanity, it would be this week. There was that wonderful rescue of the Wild Boar soccer team from northern Thailand. That was quite a story as it unfolded. Just two weeks ago, on Saturday, this young coach told his guys after practice, "Hey, let's go explore this cave." So he took his team of 12 boys, ages 11-16, to go spelunking. Then the rains came and they discovered that the cave behind them was flooding. So they went deeper and ended up about two and half miles into the cave.

Later that day the parents heard what was happening and contacted the authorities—and the search was on. The next day, on Sunday, some rescuers got about a mile and a half into the cave and had to retreat because of the severe flooding. They brought in pumps, but that wasn't enough. In the end, a thousand people were there to help—including lots of military and police personnel—representing six countries. They sent in expert divers and medics. Everyone wondered how the story would end.

It took nine days for two British divers to finally reach the boys. They were propped up on a ledge where they were safely out of the water. But they couldn't get the boys out. By this time their health was poor. So food and medicine were brought in. Then they had to be trained to snorkel and scuba dive. It ultimately took a week to extract everyone from the cave. Unfortunately, one Thai SEAL diver actually died in the process.

When you think about the 13 lives in that cave, it's interesting how much attention the world gave them. From China, America, Australia, Great Britain—all these countries came together to love their neighbor. Don't you wish every story was that great? What are the stories we're hearing in this chapter? We're hearing about oppression, envy, loneliness, plus a leader who won't give up authority. Solomon hears stories from all over the world, both about heroes and tragedy or suffering. He knows the world is not okay. He's not blind to evil but is very aware of reality in our world. There's no pretending, yet he doesn't lose faith.

Isn't that the wisdom we want? We want to live in a world that doesn't make sense, yet we want to come out still believing and trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what we're experiencing through Solomon. But we have to admit this is a unique way to get there. When he finally gets to the wisdom, it's a simple phrase: "Two is better than one." You would think he would give us rocket science to solve the world's problems. But two is better than one? It's so profound that Solomon is simply saying, "Wisdom is in friendship."

But he does this in a dramatic way. He shows us that the root of the world's problems is the lack of love, the failure of people to love one another. All the drivenness, self-hatred and isolation can be traced to that, therefore the remedy to these problems is love of our neighbor. That's the wisdom he gives us. So today we'll look at the contrast between the broken world we live in—this present evil age—and the hope of a new and better community, a redeemed community.

## Our Present Broken Community

Notice that Solomon is specifically commenting on things he sees.

- Verse one: "*And I saw....And behold....*" He's observing the oppression. He's very aware of what's going on.
- Verse four: "*Then I saw....*"
- Verse seven: "*Again I saw....*" And so on.

He's at street level, watching the world and noticing what's going on. He sums up what he sees with this phrase in verse three: "*...the evil deeds that are done under the sun.*"

The Preacher is describing the world's brokenness through little vignettes. First he speaks of oppression, then envy, then foolishness, then loneliness. He gives little pithy stories that draw out the world's brokenness. As a matter of fact, if this chapter was part of the morning news' headlines, this would be the feed:

- Verses 1-3: "Better off dead. Helpless. Oppressed by the powerful. No comforters. Injustice."
- Verses 4-6: "The secret to success discovered. Envy of neighbor inspires achievement."
- Verses 7-12: "Dissatisfaction. Loneliness at an all-time high. Friendlessness."
- Verses 13-15 "Foolish leader won't get out of saddle. Leader doesn't hand over the reins, won't listen to anyone." Have we not been in civil wars with other nations because a leader won't leave?

We know these stories and they're very present in our day as well. There's nothing new under the sun is how Ecclesiastes puts it.

Jumping into Ecclesiastes 4 is like starting your Bible in Genesis 4, where the first story you read is Cain murdering his brother Abel. You think, “Didn’t God just create the world and they’re already killing each other?” The story line of the Bible unfolds so fast. It begins with God as a loving Ruler Who made the world, Who made us rulers of everything in the world. But it didn’t stay that way. We all rejected God as Ruler, preferring to live life our own way. We failed to rule ourselves or our society. That’s the story line of the Bible, then everything else becomes a big rescue mission, undertaken by God, to rescue people for His glory.

That’s what we see in Ecclesiastes 4. Solomon is witnessing the results of our rebellion against God. If we’re going to rebel against our God, we’re also going to rebel against our neighbor. We’ll use our neighbor for our own benefit. People will become objects to us. Our alienation from God results in horrific relationship experiences. Yet if it wasn’t for God’s common grace, we would never have any good stories. But because there’s still evidence of God’s grace—of how we’re made in His image—thankfully there are still many stories that grip our hearts.

What Solomon is focusing on here, however, is the fallenness of the world. I think everyone, Christian or not, would agree with the Beatles when they say, “All we need is love.” Maybe that’s overstated, but I think it’s true. Our world lacks love. If you remember the song lyrics, there’s a little phrase that’s repeated: “It’s easy. It’s easy. It’s easy.” Well, it’s actually not easy. In fact, it might be the most difficult thing for us to do. Because of our rebellion against God, we are now in a fallen condition, as Solomon is observing.

Let me go through each of these vignettes quickly before we look at the redeemed community that God can bring.

**The first vignette speaks of oppression**, which in direct violation of God’s law. Leviticus 19:13 says, “*You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him.*” Zechariah 7:10 says, “*Do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.*”

It’s important that we realize that this oppression is occurring “under the sun,” because there’s still an eternal God at work. To Him, these are relatively short seasons, then there will be judgment. People will give account for the evil done under the sun. Nothing is going to escape God’s notice, as we’ll see later in this book.

But think about how this applies in our day. Solomon certainly didn’t know what would take place in the future in our world. For example, in 2014 the worst imaginable story came out. Almost 300 middle school and high school girls were kidnapped in northern Nigeria by Boko Haram and forced into Islamic marriages. It was a boarding school, so parents grabbed whatever they could and fled to that area to try to defend their children. But when they got to the school, no

one was there. The forest was bare. There was no military or police or government intervention. There were tears and great despair. No one knew what would happen.

Then it happened again in February 2018. Boko Haram this time took 110 girls. No one was there to protect or rescue them. It was quiet.

That's what Solomon is seeing—great oppression, tears and no comfort. He's not saying no one sympathized—but he's referring to real help in these situations.

To oppress someone is to take advantage of them. It's to rob from them, to seek gain at their expense. That's what we've seen in Ecclesiastes. It could be physical, emotional or financial gain, or even spiritual gain. It's the controlling of someone for your own self-interest. It's the opposite of loving them—and it's a great evil before God Who is very aware when it happens.

If you look, for example, at the list in Zechariah of who is most vulnerable to oppression, one group is the poor. When a company folds, somehow the poor employees are the ones who suffer the most. Often the executives simply move to other jobs. Or it's the women and children and foreigners who suffer the most. It's the marginalized in society—the minorities, the disabled. These awful things happen to people like this and we see their tears. But too often there is no comfort.

In fact, if your eyes are really open to the world, you can see why Solomon would say in verses two and three that they would be better off dead—or never having been born in the first place. He seems to be on the edge of despair and he brings us with him. Still, he doesn't lose hope. He's being honest about the evil, but he hangs on.

There was a movie about 20 years ago called "Life Is Beautiful." It's a great Italian film, so it has subtitles. It's the story of Guido, an Italian-Jewish waiter. Through his charm he wins over this girl, they marry and have a child. But the movie is set during the Nazi regime—and he's Jewish. The first half of the movie is sort of a comedy-romance, but the second half reveals tragedy and atrocity, as Guido ends up in a prison camp, along with his son. So in the face of evil, Guido seeks to keep his humor.

The movie doesn't downplay the evils of the holocaust, but he works to keep his son aware that there is more than what he sees around him. So he imagines life with his son to be different. What results is a depiction of the deepest joys as being those one doesn't often see. Guido is rescuing his son in this way.

This is ultimately what Ecclesiastes as a whole is doing as well. Solomon keeps reminding us that the greatest reality is God, a loving Creator, and our deepest sorrows are what cause us to flee to Him. That is the great hope we have. Yet at the same time, Solomon takes us to the edge of despair when he says things like, "It's better to never have been born."

We must always remember that our God knows what our suffering is like. He knows what oppression is, because He Himself took on flesh and became like one of us in every way except sin. Jesus sees our suffering and is able to give us compassion and comfort. More than that, He is the One Who can actually rescue us—sheep without a shepherd. Although we are waiting for Christ to fully bring His Kingdom, we wait with hope.

The next snapshot of oppression is connected to the first. What drove those oppressors? Solomon could have continued talking about how to help the oppressed, but instead he focuses on **helping the oppressors**. That's the compassion of God right there. What drives oppressors? Verse four says they're driven by envy of their neighbor. They're trying to get ahead by taking advantage of others. Then in verse five Solomon points to another reason why oppressors do what they do—they're foolish. *"The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh."* It's a gross image that implies that when a man runs out of food, he starts devouring himself.

Envy has both hands full; foolishness is empty-handed. That's an interesting contrast. So picture them living in the same house—envy and the fool. Say you have an industrious father driven by envy, always boasting that his success is due to his hard work. Both hands are full of his toil and achievements. As he rises on the corporate ladder, he has no thought for the person on the rung ahead of him. He'll step on that guy. He'll do whatever it takes. He puts down others, rather than rejoicing when they succeed. He's so driven by envy that he hates any co-worker who gets the promotion instead of him. Envy is when you feel unhappy at anyone else's success. It's one of the Seven Deadly Sins, so it's destructive to others and to you.

But what about the other person in the house? You could either follow in his steps and be like him, or the pendulum can swing the other way. In verse five, this laid-back, foolish son is not motivated at all. He's got two hands folded on his lap, perhaps hiding the TV remote. Little does he realize how much he's like his father. They both are unloving to their neighbor. They both hate their neighbor. The foolish son has empty hands—he's not helping. And the dad has two hands full of achievements and boasting, he dislikes everyone and he's not helping. Both hate their neighbor, just in different ways.

Proverbs speaks of both: *"A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot"* (Proverbs 14:30). But the fool is no better than the one who envies. Proverbs 6:10-11 says, *"A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber."* The hands are really key to this illustration. If two hands are full of toil, there's not a free hand to help. There's no giving, no generosity, no service. That's the image. All the hands are full of "Me, my, what I want, my achievements and my goods. I just use you to get where I want to go. If I want to rise an inch higher, I'll step on you." The son has two hands empty. He's no

better off. He's not helpful either. He lives in a self-centered world like his father. He's reacting in a different extreme.

Ecclesiastes 4:6 then gives us the wisdom in this illustration: *"Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind."* Better is one hand full with peace of mind. Better contentment with one hand full, so that your second hand is free to serve. That's the wisdom. That's the better way of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. That's the way of wisdom: contentment with what we have.

I feel I could fall into different camps at different times. There are times I just want to do nothing and there are other times when I'm manic in busyness. I don't know whether you lean more toward being a sluggard or a frantic doer, but it's good to ask yourself, "Why am I working so hard? Or why am I not working that hard?"

At the beginning of June I had some time off, so we took a short fishing trip with the boys. One of the first things I noticed was how carefree my children were. I thought, "Man, I've forgotten how that felt." It landed heavily on me that they aren't carrying the weight of the world; they're enjoying life. Spike ball, board games and fishing—all kinds of activities. "Lord, please restore me. I'm lost. I'm too caught up in things."

Maybe you don't feel that envious, like you're disliking something. But if there's any discontent, it could very well have its roots connected to envy. Envy runs in a variety of emotions. So it's good to notice our hearts and ask the Lord, "Forgive me for thinking the world is on my shoulders and it's up to me to work on this." Where's my generosity? What am I spending my time on?

What results is the third snapshot we're given in verses seven and eight: *"one person who has no other..."* **The path of envy ends up in friendlessness, loneliness, isolation, alienation.** God's not a single-person God. God's one in three Persons, and we're made in God's image, so we're made for community. The fact that we're isolating ourselves from others is rebellion ultimately against God. He's made us for community, because that's Who He is.

But when the driving force of our lives is trying to be satisfied, we're like this guy. Verse eight says, *"...his eyes are never satisfied..."* He was driven by want—but what was his goal? The problem isn't money itself and the answer is not poverty. In the words of the New Testament, it's the love of money (1 Timothy 6:10), or the love of your time, or the love of having no responsibilities, or the love of ignoring others. It's what we love that's the issue. But whatever it is, it never satisfies us, because it's chasing wind. It's an empty bubble and it won't sustain us. That's why this guy never asks, "Who am I serving? What am I toiling for?" He never has anyone in mind. He's not thinking about others—it's all about himself.

So be renewed by the realization that God made you to be in community. For that reason, part of your labor is always for others. Wouldn't it be a renewing experience if in the workplace, we knew we were there not just for ourselves—to pay our bills and to get ahead—but we're there for our colleagues. Our question should be, "How is the 'we'? How is the human race? Where is my work taking us?" We can turn away from our self-importance and self-focus to think about others. Solomon has just shown us the scary outcome when we don't see things this way.

Finally, even with the king, **popularity is short-lived**. You might make it to the next rung, but then you might find yourself at a brick wall. There might be nothing there. "Why did I climb this ladder? Why did I step on everyone in the process? There's nothing here! It's a cinder-block wall." That's what the king learned. Yes, the popularity was great. But the guy who will take your place next doesn't even care that you were his leader. As it says in verse 16, it's all "*...vanity and a striving after wind.*" Everyone is eventually forgotten.

### **Our Redeemed Community**

Here is the beauty. In contrast to this broken approach—lack of love for our neighbor, living for self—wisdom is right in the heart of this chapter in verses 9-12. It's so simple that we almost could have thought of it ourselves. Where did he get this? "*Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.*" Picture in your mind a couple travelers as we look at verses 10-12:

*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.*

It seems like the benefits on a journey of any sort is to be with people. Journey bring pits and cold nights and bandits or marauders. We face enemies, trials, struggles and temptations that are greater than us. We can't do this journey by ourselves. That's a single cord that's easily snapped. How much better to have a friend, or two friends, or three friends—you can't break that cord. That's what he's saying.

Think about an individualistic mindset—how foolish that is. You'll be broken. You won't make it. Think about the kid who says, "Hey, I'm on the soccer team at school." He's got the jersey, the shin guards, the cleats, the ball. But then he never goes to practice. He just kicks the ball around the back yard...goal! He says, "I'm on the soccer team," but will he last? Maybe he signed up earlier but the coach doesn't know him. "Who is this kid? I never see him." Will he last

on that team? I think not. That intentionality might sound great—"I'm on the team, I've got all the gear"—but if he's not with the coach and the others on the team, that's not genuine. He won't last.

I think that's similar to what we're seeing here. Wisdom says, "Do life with others. Have friends. Be a friend. Learn friendship." Often this verse is used in a marriage context, but ultimately it's really about friendship. Although hopefully married people are friends, even best friends. But we should go to church and we should make people a priority.

I seriously doubt anyone on their deathbed is saying, "I wish I had one more day at the office. Bring me the office. I want to do one more vote, or one more achievement." On your deathbed, you will more likely ask, "Will you ask so-and-so if I can call him? I'd love to touch base." You'll be thinking about others. You'll be drawn to those around you. It's a good reminder to realize that when that end is in sight, it reveals our true priorities. Our priority now should be other people.

That's the wisdom we're seeing here in Ecclesiastes 4. It's so simple, but he's pointing out the value in not ignoring friendship. We're hesitant sometimes in friendships because we're self-protective. We think, "I'm not sure I really want anyone to know my thoughts," so we distance ourselves. Or we may really be self-reliant. "I want to figure this out on my own before I connect with anyone else. I want to have the answers first. I don't want to appear to be a learner; I want to be the teacher."

These are the things that can drive our hearts. But that's where perfect love can cast out the fear of being known by someone. It might be the fear of being a really genuine friend, whom someone can trust, who will help you when you fall, encourage and build you up. Friends can point you forward be there when you need them. I want to grow into being a better friend and I trust you do as well.

This is the wisdom of living in this world of evil. All the brokenness and lack of love for neighbors can be solved by loving our neighbor. Doesn't that sound like Jesus? He said the most important commandment is loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, then secondly, loving our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40). That is the wisdom—and for many of us, it may mean being renewed in our friendship with God.

I just received a book as a gift, a book by pastor Drew Hunter, on the subject of friendship. I haven't read it all yet, but I already commend it to you. Here's a quote from his book:

What if you could have a friend who knew you better than anyone, better than you even knew yourself? What if knowing everything about you, he still loved you—and even liked you? What if you could have a friend who, by his very relationship with you, would transform

you to become a better friend to others? You see, His name is Jesus. He's called "the Friend of sinners."

Your friendship with Christ not only brings you eternal life, but He also shapes and transforms us to be friends of others. Maybe our biggest first step is to grow in friendship with Jesus, then we'll know better how to be friends with others. Jesus even said this in John 15:15: *"No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you."*

Jesus is saying, "That's what friendship is. All I've heard I'm making known to you." He's revealed Himself to you, so if you have responded by faith and trust in Him, turning from your sin, then you're a friend of Jesus. You're a Christian. You have new life in Christ. You're also learning what friendship is. It's opening up the plan God has for each other. We can be friends, because there's no one closer than Jesus who is going to stick closer than a brother. He's the One Who will really stick with you and He's going to help us stick with others.

Jesus knows this feeling of isolation. He knows the struggle of loneliness. He knows the ache of going through friendlessness, because even on the cross, He was abandoned by His friends. The eleven disciples all fled from Him. The whole country of Israel was against Him. Even God His Father turned His face away. That's why Jesus said, "My God, My God. Why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:45-50).

Jesus knows this oppression first hand and what envy does to people around you. He knows friendlessness and loneliness first hand—yet He's coming to you. He'll be your friend and He'll teach you deeply Who He is. He comes to us when we're pursuing other things. We're still in the rat race, thinking, "I'm going to satisfy myself in other ways." He says, "Keep your life free from the love of money and be content with what you have." He says, "I will never leave you or forsake you." Notice the promise: "I'll be your friend; therefore, stop loving money. Stop going after these things."

Seriously, this should loosen us up. There's something about this friendship that is life-changing regarding what we pursue, what we live for and where our contentment is found. It's a glorious truth that we have to recover. C.S. Lewis said, "To the ancients, friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves, the crown of life in the school of virtue. The modern world, in comparison, ignores it."

So let Ecclesiastes 4 remind you [to develop friendships this week. It might be practical for you. It might be someone you've not contacted. It might be you opening up to share some

struggles with someone else. Make an effort in your friendships with one another and with those around you. It's a great reminder of God's Word and what we have in Christ.

Let's pray.

Lord, thank You for wisdom. We're foolish. We don't get these things without You and Your Word. We want to be freshly renewed in Your grace and Your mercy and Your love. Thank You so much. Thanks for our families and friends that we do have. They're a real provision. May we make them a priority. Lord, help us to prioritize them in a good way.

And we do want to work hard, knowing that's biblical. But may we always have things to give. May there always be time and may it be in the context of people. Lord, help us with this. You know our hearts. You know areas where we can grow. We pray all this for Your glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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## New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ [www.newcbc.org](http://www.newcbc.org)

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