

Whom Can You Trust?

Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

Though it might be hard to see at first, the overarching subject of this chapter is *relationships*. “What is a relationship?” asks Paul Tripp and Tim Lane, in their excellent book, ominously entitled, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*. They answer, a relationship is “the intersection of the stories of two people. The problem is that an awful lot of carnage takes place at this intersection.”¹ As the Preacher continues his examination of life under the sun, he bears witness to that carnage as he takes a look at relationships and social interaction “under the sun,” in the realm we live in day to day. The Preacher (most likely the ancient king, Solomon, the son of King David) has been on a quest to find lasting gain and significance in what we can see and experience in the world we inhabit. So far he’s looked at human activity, human wisdom, time, and eternity, and apart from what God does and gives, everything he’s seen has been found wanting—it’s all vapor or mist, vanity and striving after wind.

So he turns his attention to relationships; human interaction. Everybody longs for relationship—to know and be known by someone. To love and be loved by someone. It’s one of the most basic elements of being human—to be made in God’s image is to be a relational being, because God is Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—one God, three persons, who enjoy perfect, eternal communion with one another in knowledge, glory, and love. Even the “new humanism” that *New York Times* columnist David Brooks writes about recognizes “We’re not rational animals, or laboring animals; we’re *social* animals. We emerge out of relationships and live to bond with each other and connect to larger ideas.”²

So Solomon looks to see if there is any lasting gain to be found in human relationships—can the intersection of our lives give us the abiding joy and significance we’re so desperately looking for? But what he finds instead is a mosaic of relational dysfunction. The way you make a mosaic or a stained glass window is by taking fragments of broken glass or tile and piecing them together to make a picture and tell a story. This chapter divides into four sections,³ giving us four different portraits of how disappointing relationships can be. Like four stained-glass windows

¹ Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2006, 2008), 62.

² David Brooks, commenting on his recent book, *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement* (Random House, 2011); italics mine. Available at: <http://www.amazon.com/The-Social-Animal-Character-Achievement/dp/140006760X>.

³ Though commentators are not agreed on the precise structure of this chapter, there are several reasons to see it hanging together as one: the common subject of relationship; repeated literary features in each section, such as “and I saw” (vv. 1, 4, 7, 15), the mention of “two” (vv. 3, 6, 8-12, 15), and a “better than” statement (vv. 3, 6, 9, 13). See Richard L. Schultz, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, Gary Burge and Andrew Hill, eds. (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).

placed side-by-side, each portrait here uses the fragments of broken human relationships to show us in living color the instability of those relationships in a fallen world. Again, the smoke, the vapor, the vanity of it all.

What do you do when someone takes advantage of you and no one else seems to care? How do you respond when the time you spend with a friend secretly reinforces your jealousy of their situation—their clothes, their kids, their spouse, their home? How do you handle it when someone prioritizes their career over the commitment they made to you, or when you realize that’s precisely what you’ve been doing but it’s too late to fix it? What happens when the praise you received as you began your new leadership role quickly devolves into bitter criticism and spite? With such fragile relationships in this world, whom can you trust?

That’s our question this morning. And though the Preacher is not going to come right out and answer it, he will take us by the shoulders and point us in the right direction, such that if we follow that trail, we’ll see that despite the instability of human relationships we were in fact made for community, and that community comes from being united with the Triune God and one another in Christ.

I want to take us on a tour of each window this morning—each section of this passage (1-3 / 4-6 / 7-12 / 13-16), and help us to take in the unsettling reality of how our relationships in life are prone to disappointment. If you’re just joining us for this series that no doubt sounds like a rather morbid course to take—a bit of a downer; not very positive and encouraging. No, it’s not. But it’s real. It’s honest. And that’s what the Preacher is forcing us to be—honest about the problems and disappointments of this world. Which is not to say that there isn’t any hope—there is. But we won’t really see it and cling to it unless we are first disenchanted with all of the empty hopes and fleeting dreams that we tend to hold onto instead.

The tour begins in **vv. 1-3**, which pick up the theme of injustice from the end of ch. 3 and show us both the ugliness of oppression and the frustration when there is no companion to comfort the oppressed. Verse 1:

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

Oppression, exploitation, forcibly taking advantage of others, coercing or even injuring someone else for your own selfish gain, using your clout, money, or power to get away with it—there are few uglier traits of fallen humanity than oppression. When greed meets opportunity and mixes with power in the heart of a sinner, it yields a firestorm of oppression. Governments forcibly exploit their people; the people forcibly exploit the poor, weak, and defenseless. Racism. Human trafficking. Violence. One culture marginalizes another. One nation builds its empire on the backs of other weaker nations. And what enables the oppressors to get away with it is that they have “power” on their side—whether its control, resources, violence, approval, whatever—power is on the side of the oppressor. Which actually tells us something about humanity. The difference between the oppressed and the oppressor isn’t always moral quality; very often it’s simply *power*. When the power shifts, the roles tend to simply reverse. Oppression is in our

blood—all our blood. When we gather and assemble the broken shards left in our wake, this is the picture we find.

But notice what shocks Solomon even more than the reality of oppression—the fact that there is no one there to comfort the oppressed. Note the repetition: “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*” (4:1). Oppression is terrible. But to face that oppression all alone, with no one to comfort you, to stand alongside you, pick you up or defend you—well, according to Solomon, you’re better off dead.

Verses 2-3 are probably some of the most shocking verses in the book. Is it even okay to say this?—that in light of the evil and rampant oppression in the world that the dead who never have to see it are better off than the living, and that those who aren’t even born yet are better than both? You can see why interpreters ancient and modern have questioned the Preacher’s orthodoxy at times. But if you stop and think about it, this isn’t too far off from some of the things that come out of our mouths. How many of us have thought or uttered, “I’m not sure I want to bring any more kids into this messed up world.” That’s the same sentiment—things are so bad, it’s better if they don’t ever exist than to exist and see this. It’s the kind of perspective that comes when the evil we see eclipses the goodness we know of God and his plan.

Solomon’s just being honest here. And it’s hard to think of relationships providing lasting gain when the human heart is so dark that we’re vulnerable to oppression, or to becoming oppressors ourselves.

Let’s move on to the second window, vv. 4-6 and the ugly side of competition and innovation. Verse 4:

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.⁵ The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.
⁶ Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

We’ve all heard the phrase, “Keeping up with the Joneses”—that temptation to compete with your neighbor for the best lawn, the nicest home. They got a 10’ trampoline, we’ll buy a 12’. There’s nothing new about this temptation—Solomon made this observation millennia ago. But don’t miss his commentary on it—“This also is vanity and a striving after wind.” Ever tried to chase and wrap your hands around the wind? That’s about how effective and fulfilling it is when envy fuels your work and labor. It leaves us unsatisfied, because just when we buy the 12’ trampoline, they come out with an 18’ model, and around and around we go.

But beyond being futile, it’s also damaging—to ourselves and others. Instead of loving your neighbor in relationship, you compete with him for status. Instead of laying down our lives in love and service for another, we protect ourselves and our stuff, eager to build our own personal Edens, where life is just as we want it, and we become, as we say, “the envy” of all our neighbors and friends. Essayist Wendell Berry reflects, “It seems that we have been reduced almost to a state of absolute economics, in which people and all other creatures and things may

be considered purely as economic ‘units,’ or integers of production, and in which a human being may be dealt with . . . ‘merely as a covetous machine.’”⁴

Envy is dehumanizing. It’s a hammer against the glass of human relationships. There are only two relationships where envy or jealousy are ever used positively in Scripture—the relationship between God and his people, and between husband and wife.⁵ God’s people belong to him; it’s good and right for him to be jealous of their devotion and affection. The husband and wife belong to each other; our stomachs ought to turn when we see someone encroaching on that exclusive relationship. But in every other relationship, envy shatters community and spoils work in pursuit of self-centered gain. Once again, human relationships are found wanting.

But how do we approach our work if envy is such a threat? That’s another question Solomon raises here, and it’s worth a comment or two. One author identifies three possible responses in this passage, all dealing with the posture of our hands, which we use for work.⁶ First there are “folded hands,” a picture of laziness. One might be tempted to conclude that if my work is fueled by envy and won’t supply anything that lasts, I’m just going to sit back and watch the rat race from a safe distance and blog about it in my jammies. But as one commentator describes, “As toil can be all-consuming, so idleness is self-cannibalizing.”⁷ Laziness is self-destructive—“the fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh”—because there’s nothing else in the cupboard.

A second posture is two hands cupped together like kids at the neighbor’s door on Halloween.⁸ We want more, as much as we can get—the posture of greed and envy. But as the Preacher notes in v. 6, “Better is a [single] handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.” We’ve seen already that work is a good thing—a gift from God, and something to be enjoyed when we’re satisfied in him. That’s the picture of quietness here—a quiet satisfaction and contentment with what we have, rather than the fruitless pursuit of what our neighbors have. That doesn’t mean that innovation and hard work are bad things; they’re good things. The problem here is envy and materialism that substitute status and stuff for God and neighbor.

Oppression, envy. Let’s take a look at our third window, **vv. 7-12** and the danger of isolation. Verse 7:

Again, I saw vanity under the sun: ⁸ 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. ⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ 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! ¹¹ Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? ¹² And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him- a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

⁴ “Economy and Pleasure,” in *What Are People For? Essays by Wendell Berry* (New York: North Point, 1990), 130; cited in Bartholomew, 195-196.

⁵ E.g., Isa. 11:13; 26:11; Ps. 96:9; Nah. 1:2; Num. 5:14, 30; Prov. 6:34. See Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 137.

⁶ See Sydney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 103-104.

⁷ William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Louisville: John Knox, 2000), 50. As cited in Philip G. Ryken, *Ecclesiastes* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 111.

⁸ Greidanus, 103-104.

These verses are no doubt the best known in this chapter, and some of the best known in the book. We often hear them at weddings, and whereas they certainly apply to marriage, that's not specifically what it's talking about. These verses speak of the importance of companionship in general (whether friendship, family, or marriage), as well as chastising the workaholic who sacrifices companionship for material gain.

So, closely related to the last window we see a picture of someone whose broken life tells a sad story. He's all alone, spends all his life working and building wealth, though never satisfied, and never stops to ask why? Think of Ebenezer Scrooge in Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*—the misery of a miser, who chooses isolation for the sake of selfish gain. This, too, is relationship gone awry; a vanity, fruitless and hard to understand.

But the rest of this window tells a different story. Verses 9-12 capture the sunlight in a particularly brilliant way, to remind us that even though the relationships we experience consist in broken fragments and are often disappointing and hard, *we were actually made for relationship with one another*. Again, we are relational beings, made in the image of our relational, Triune God. When God said of Adam in Genesis 2:18, "it is not good that the man should be alone," that statement had "more to do with God's design for humanity than Adam's neediness."⁹

Solomon illustrates the importance and value of companionship, how "two are better than one," with the imagery of taking a journey. Travel in the ancient near East was fraught with peril—there were pits to fall in, things that could trip you up. The cold of night, the threat of robbers. And even with things like cell phones, a lot of those same dangers remain today. But if you think of the difference between taking a journey by yourself versus travelling with a companion, it's easy to see the value in community—if one falls, the other can help them up. Two can keep warm together on a cold night under the stars. Two can protect each other in the threat of attack. And if two are better than one, three is all the stronger, as Solomon summarizes with a proverb that has its roots in ancient Sumer: "a cord of three strands is not quickly broken."¹⁰ We were made for relationship.

Now, I'm not trying to guilt anyone for using this text in their wedding (it certainly applies), but neither do I want to leave anyone with the impression that the companionship we were made for, that's being described here, can't be experienced outside of marriage. I've sat through wedding sermons where well meaning preachers have gone on about how "one is the loneliest number" and the humiliation and torture of "solitary confinement" in order to speak of the glories of marriage. But as Christopher Yuan pointed out when he was here a couple months ago, too often we treat singleness like a consolation prize for those who don't marry.¹¹ We rightly celebrate the beauty and joy of marriage, but we wrongly set it over against singleness, as though the only way to experience true companionship in life is through marriage. I'm reminded of the lines from one of Caedmon's Call's several songs about lost love: "Maybe I have the gift that everyone speaks so highly of. Funny how nobody wants it."¹²

⁹ Lane and Tripp, 9.

¹⁰ See Longman, 143.

¹¹ Christopher Yuan, "A Christian Response to Homosexuality," available at: <http://www.westgate-church.org/sermons/sermon/2012-04-28/a-christian-response-to-homosexuality>.

¹² Caedmon's Call, "Can't Lose You," *Long Line of Leavers* (Essential, 2000).

But marriage is only one expression of companionship. It is a sacred and particularly intimate one; but only one. There is also *family* and *friendship* in the Bible, and it speaks very highly of both of those. Children and singles were made for community and relationship just as much as married people and parents. The question is, *how are healthy relationships possible in a fallen world when relationships so often disappoint?* We'll come back to that question in a moment. But first we need to take a look at our final window, **vv. 13-16**, and our tendency toward to prioritize self over others.

Verse 13:

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

We've seen oppression. We've seen envy. We've seen isolation. And now we see pride. This window tells a story that all of us are familiar with: transition in leadership. Many attempts have been made to identify a historical figure behind the story, perhaps Joseph and his rise from prison to Pharaoh's right hand in Genesis, but no historical figures fit all the details. It's probably a simple parable. But underneath the relational dysfunction on display is pride.

It starts with an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. This man saw no need for community or relationship in his prideful self-sufficiency. But along comes a wise youth, poor and underprivileged, even imprisoned at one point, to take the king's place. All is well, right? The new guy's here—he's going to fix everything! But notice what happens in v. 16—there's no end to the people he leads, and yet, those who come later will be just as disenchanted with him as they were with his predecessor. The same pride that displaced his predecessor moves his followers to reject him when their self-centered expectations go unmet. As one author notes, "He has reached a pinnacle of human glory, only to be stranded there. It is yet another of our human anticlimaxes and ultimately empty achievements."¹³

How many times do we see that story replayed today? Think of coaches—the franchise fires the football coach for his lousy season, and everyone celebrates the arrival of his replacement and the era of domination that lies ahead. But within a few years the story replays itself. We see it in political offices. All but one of the last twelve presidents has left office with much lower approval ratings than when he entered.¹⁴ And don't think that pastors and churches are immune from this either.

Like the residue of soap on a dish that causes it to slip from your hand and shatter on the ground, so a little pride among a leader and those led ruins a great community. None of us are immune.

So where does all of this leave us? If relationships are so precarious and unsatisfying, so often a reminder of the fallen world we live in, where do we go from here? Staring too long at a mosaic

¹³ Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (BST; Downers Grove: IVP, 1976), 52.

¹⁴ "How the Presidents Stack Up", *Wall Street Journal*. Available at: <http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/info-presapp0605-31.html>.

like this can leave us dizzy and discouraged. Are we simply left to throw up our hands and give up on people? Do we put our guard up and our head down and walk through life always keeping an eye on the exit should things turn south? Do we resolve to take the upper hand—better to take advantage of others than to be taken advantage of? Is all this even worth it?

But as Lane and Tripp remind us, “If you wonder, *Why bother?* The answer is, ‘Because God did.’”¹⁵ Now unlike some of his earlier investigations, Solomon doesn’t resolve the tension for us in this passage. But as we think about the implications of being disappointed in human relationships under the sun, we’re reminded to look to God, who dwells above the sun, who is himself the perfection of relationship as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and who sent his Son Jesus to deal with our relational dysfunction—the sin and pride and rebellion that not only fractures our relationships on earth, but severs us from our God in heaven—Jesus came to deal with that reunite us with God and one another. “We can’t move toward community with one another until we have been drawn into community with God.”¹⁶

Understanding God as Trinity is crucial to finding relational wholeness. I’m excited that later this summer we’re going to take a break from Ecclesiastes for a few weeks while Pastor Bruce takes us through a series on God as Trinity and what that means for our relationships and our mission as a church.

But the only way to come into communion with God is through Jesus Christ, who stepped into the brokenness of our relationships to bring forgiveness, repentance, and wholeness through the cross and resurrection for all who believe. He was the oppressed who had no one to comfort him. He was ridiculed and marginalized out of his neighbor’s envy. He was abandoned on his journey to the cross. He was welcomed into Jerusalem as King with cries of “Hosanna, Save us!” only to be rejected and murdered a week later. And he did all of it to bring his Father glory by rescuing us. Lane and Tripp describe it like this:

The shattered relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the cross provides the basis for our reconciliation. No other relationship suffered more than what Father, Son, and Holy Spirit endured when Jesus hung on the cross and cried, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Matt. 27:46). Jesus was willing to be the rejected Son so that our families would know reconciliation. Jesus was willing to become the forsaken friend so that we could have loving friendships. Jesus was willing to be the rejected Lord so that we could live in loving submission to one another. Jesus was willing to be the forsaken brother so that we could have godly relationships. Jesus was willing to be the crucified King so that our communities would experience peace.¹⁷

The relational wholeness we long for, we were made for, is only available in Christ. And in Christ, the same gospel that rescues us from our sin and brokenness, also changes us to love one another the way Jesus loved us.

Now sadly, that’s not always the experience in the church. “Relational wholeness” is rarely the first word that comes to mind when we think of Christians, whether we’re part of the church or on the outside looking in. And I don’t know where you are today on that spectrum. But I do

¹⁵ Lane and Tripp, 14.

¹⁶ Lane and Tripp, 23.

¹⁷ Lane and Tripp, 13.

know this, that *Jesus is not finished with his people*. We're still sinners; we're still hypocrites; we still hurt each other, and we're still hurt by others. But we are not without hope. To quote Paul Tripp and Tim Lane one more time, "Every painful thing we experience in relationships is meant to remind us of our need for [God]. And every good thing we experience is meant to be a metaphor of what we can only find in [God]." ¹⁸ And when we surrender our lives to Christ in faith, and come into relationship with the Triune God, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us to change our lives—to help us comfort the oppressed and defenseless, lay our lives down for our neighbors, walk along side one another in love, and submit humbly to one another in Christ.

We were made for community, and true community comes from being united with the Triune God, and with one another through faith in Christ.

¹⁸ Lane and Tripp, 8.