

Second Baptist Church of Doylestown

Bible Study Notes: Ecclesiastes 4

"The Vanity of Acquiring Riches Over Family"

4/17/13

SUMMARY

The Preacher continues to share his observations gleaned during the course of his search for the purpose of life under the sun. Earlier he related the injustice he saw (cf. 3:16). Now we are told how he considered those who were oppressed with no comforter. In such a state, he concluded the dead were better than the living, and better than both was to never be born (1-4).

The Preacher then describes what he saw as the vanity of toil and skillful work, especially when one is alone. While one who does nothing is a fool and consumes his own flesh, it is better to have a little with quietness than a lot with much toil. A grave misfortune is the person with no companion, son, nor brother, who labors endlessly for riches that do not satisfy and does not consider who will receive that for which he deprives himself of much good in life. On the other hand, the Preacher saw great value in friendship. He illustrates the principle of synergy in their work and how they can help one another in times of need (5-12).

The chapter closes with an illustration of the vanity of popularity. While a young and wise man who becomes king may be popular at first, with the passing of time he is not appreciated by those who come along later (13-16).

I. THE OPPRESSION OF MEN (4:1-3)

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 the one who has never been born, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun.

A. WHAT THE PREACHER REVIEWED (1)

1. He considered the oppression done under the sun
2. He saw the tears of the oppressed, who had no comforter
3. He observed power on the side of the oppressors

B. WHAT THE PREACHER REASONED (2-3)

1. He praised the dead more than the living
2. Better than both is the person who:
 - a. Has never existed
 - b. Has not seen the evil work done under the sun

II. THE VANITY OF TOIL AND SKILLFUL WORK (4:4-6)

⁴ And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ⁵ Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. ⁶ Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind.

A. IT BREEDS ENVY IN OTHERS (4)

1. He saw that toil and skillful labor is envied by others
2. This too is vanity and grasping for wind

B. TWO WAYS TO REACT TO THIS VANITY (5-6)

1. The fool does nothing, and consumes his own flesh
2. It is better to have a little with quietness

ECCLESIASTES 4:4-6

Some people are lazy while others are workaholics. The lazy person, seeing the futility of dashing about for success, idles away his time and hurts both himself and those who depend on him. The workaholic is often driven by envy, greed, and a constant desire to stay ahead of everyone else. Both extremes are foolish and irresponsible. The answer is to work hard but with moderation. Take time to enjoy the other gifts God has given, and realize that it is God who gives out the assignments and the rewards, not us.

III. THE VANITY OF ISOLATION (4:7-12)

⁷ 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! ⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: ¹⁰ If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them 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.

A. THE VANITY OF BEING ALONE (7-8)

1. He saw more vanity under the sun
2. A person who was alone, without companion, son, or brother
 - a. With no end to his labors, with no satisfaction with his riches
 - b. Who does not consider for whom he labors and deprives himself of good
3. This was vanity and a grave misfortune

B. THE VALUE OF FRIENDS (9-12)

1. Two are better than one, for they have good reward for their labor
2. If one falls, the other can lift him up
3. Their combined body heat can keep them warm
4. They can withstand one who would seek to overpower them
5. A threefold cord is not quickly broken

ECCLESIASTES 4:9-12

There are advantages to cooperating with others. Life is designed for companionship, not isolation, for intimacy, not loneliness. Some people prefer isolation, thinking they cannot trust anyone. We are not here on earth to serve ourselves, however, but to serve God and others. Don't isolate yourself and try to go it alone. Seek companions; be a team member.

IV. THE VANITY OF POPULARITY (4:13-16)

¹³ Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a 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.

A. A TALE OF TWO MEN (13-15)

1. It is better to be a poor and wise youth, than an old and foolish king who will not accept criticism
2. For the young man, though born poor, comes out of prison to become king and the living were with him

B. YET POPULARITY IS SHORT-LIVED (16)

1. The young king might rule over a populous nation
2. But another generation will arise that will not rejoice in him

ECCLESIASTES 4:13-16

Advancement or getting to the top is meaningless. Position, popularity, and prestige are poor goals for a life's work. Although many seek them, they are shadows without substance. Many people seek recognition for their accomplishments; but people are fickle, changing quickly and easily. How much better to seek God's approval. His love never changes.