

An Empty Life (6): The Quandary of Oppression

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Now turn with me to Ecclesiastes 4. Before we read the passage, let's ask God for His blessing and His Spirit for illumination. Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven, this is Your word. We ask, Holy Spirit, that You would attend the reading of it with a spirit of illumination and understanding for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Hear the word of God:

Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them. So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun. I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind. Then I looked again at vanity under the sun. There was a certain man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches and he never asked, "And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?" This too is vanity and it is a grievous task. Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up. Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart. A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction. For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him. There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will

come later will not be happy with him, for this too is vanity and striving after wind.

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

There is a dark cloud hanging over Ecclesiastes 4. It is a very somber chapter. The Preacher, Solomon, he's not a participant. Solomon was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He's observing the world, you understand, and he's observing the world without God, without Jesus, without the gospel. And he sees that there are some in the world and all that they can say is, "I wish I had never been born."

I wonder if you've ever uttered those words? Oh, a teenager will utter them in a moment of exasperation, when things just aren't going your way, but I mean this morning, have you ever uttered them in a more somber way? The world in which we live, the world in which Solomon lived, can be a very dark and bleak place without God and without Jesus.

He sees four things: he sees folk who are oppressed with no one to comfort them; he sees people making money but they are still unhappy; he sees people with power and influence and still have no real support; and he sees people trying to live their lives but have no friends. Let's begin with the oppressed.

I. The world is full of injustice.

Verse 1, "I looked again at all the acts of oppression. I saw the tears of the oppressed and they have no comforter." We call our inner cities concrete jungles. It's a euphemism for the hopelessness and despair that often mars our inner cities. Imagine one of those pictures coming out of some African country, of a little child, ribs protruding, gaunt expression on its face, eyes full but with hopelessness and despair. Some of you might have been listening to NPR, though it's probably too liberal for most of you, but you might have been listening this week to a celebration of Henry Cartier-Bresson, a photographer. He's 95 years old and there was a celebration of his photographs in the National Gallery in Paris. But a few years ago there was the same exhibition in the National Gallery in Washington. He has a very famous photograph taken in 1951, *India*, a picture of a mother and little child. And the child is just as I have described, with deep, sunken eyes like moons, that convey a sense of sheer hopelessness and despair.

Jennifer is eleven. She has a beauty about her, but it's a beauty that's tinged with sadness, brought on by years of sexual abuse. Her childhood and innocence have been taken away. She's tried to talk to her mother, but her mother doesn't know what to do and is ashamed. And has said to her, "You must never speak of this again." She is oppressed and she has no hope. Michael works for a chemical

company. He knows that every day he breathes in fumes that are killing him. He dare not speak about it. He dare not complain or he will lose his job and he needs his job. He's married. He has four children. He can barely make an existence. He's oppressed and he has no hope. Joanna, well, she hasn't got a name. Her parents don't really admit that she exists. She's 12 weeks old; she's very small; she weight about 18 grams, she's 17.5 centimeters long; she has a brain; she has a nose, eyes, ears; she even has toenails; she has a heartbeat. But in a few minutes she will be killed. She is oppressed and she has no hope. The world is full of pain. The world is full of sadness. The world is full of sorrow. Turn on the news media, not the glossy, two minute sound bite media, but turn on to the real news out there, and the world is full of pain.

And Solomon is observing the world; not his world, but the world without God, the world without Jesus, the world without hope, the world in which there is oppression. Life can be unfair, and there is so much injustice. That's the first picture.

II. Wealth does not provide happiness.

And imagine that you are at this photographic exhibition, you walk down the corridor, and there's another picture. It's a picture of a man who is trying to make money, lots of money, more money than is good for him. It begins in verse 4, "I have seen that every labor and every skill that is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor." The picture has two sides to it. There's one man and his arms are folded. He's not doing anything at all. He's opted out. The world is so full of injustice, he's opted out entirely, but Solomon sees another man and he has, in Solomon's words, "Two hands full and a lot of toil and a lot of vanity."

Solomon is describing the rat race. He's describing someone who's living all his life trying to acquire all the things, all of the toys that he can get. He has both hands full, but he still has toil. Do you know what epitomizes our society more than anything else? "I want to be a Millionaire." It says everything about our society, as though that would bring us happiness and contentment and all the joys of life.

Abraham Lincoln was, and I'm told this is a true story, walking down the street one day with his children and his children were fighting, as boys do. And an observer asks Abraham Lincoln, "What's wrong with your boys?" And Abraham Lincoln thought for a moment and he said, "It's what's wrong with all the world. I have three walnuts and my boys want two each." It's a picture of the world, of envy, of greed, and discontentment. The young, upwardly mobile, working all the hours there are, sacrificing everything; a marriage, friendships, and children, just to climb that corporate ladder and make it to the top so they can be what they thought they ought to be. Ambition becomes necessity and necessity becomes a

god, and it's all about the acquisition of things. Isn't it strange what we now consider to be our needs.

I would find it hard to live in this wonderful state of yours if there was no air conditioning. I'm sorry, but all the money in the world wouldn't be enough for me. And yet, people obviously lived here, some of you lived here, yet we now regard it as a necessity. Hard to imagine building anew house and not putting air conditioning in it.

It's a rat race. The world is a rat race. You know the bumper sticker, *Even if you win the rat race, you're still a rat.* What are you prepared to do to get to where you want to be? How many lives are you willing to trample upon? And Solomon says the motivation is envy and greed.

Let me become up close and personal, now. I think this little section has something to say to many of us here. How many warnings there are in Scripture regarding the acquisition of things, of how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus isn't saying it's impossible, but He is saying it's hard. Because the acquisition of things, the love of things, the greed, the ambition, the striving, the grasping, the two hands full mentality, can so easily get in the way of the thing that's more important, and that's our relationship with God. Godliness with contentment is great gain, the Apostle Paul said.

We'll see in the next chapter of Ecclesiastes, in verse 10, "Whoever loves money never has money enough. Whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income." Isn't that staggering? Do you ever talk to someone who has a lot of money? I mean, lots of money. And they never have enough. There's still no contentment. They still want more, the next ten thousand, or the next hundred thousand, the next million, and the markets are always going against you. Isn't that a strange thing. I want to read that verse to you again. "Whoever loves money, never has money enough. Whoever loves wealth, is never satisfied with his income." In 1934, Percy Shore invented those cat's eye reflectors, you know, those little eyes down the middle of the road at night, that reflect off the headlight beams of your car. Well, Percy Shore invented them. He became a millionaire. He had a house which had several TV sets in each room of his house, and he would spend his day going from one room to another, watching something for two minutes; then going to another room and watching something else for two minutes; and that's how he spent his life. A man's life doesn't exist in the abundance of his possessions, the Bible says.

III. You can have the wealth of the world and have no true friend.

Or, here's another picture. Move down the corridor a little. Here's a picture in verses 7 and 8, he looks again and sees another picture of vanity under the sun. "A certain man without dependent, having neither son nor brother." He's working

all the time, but he doesn't have any friends. He doesn't have anybody to work for anymore. He's made it to the top. He's climbed that corporate ladder, but he hasn't got a wife, because she's left him. He hasn't got any children, because they've left him.

Now, do you know the lyrics of this song by Harry Chapin, actually they were written by his wife. I once referred to it as a country song, in error, but this is outside of my genre, you understand .

My child arrived just the other day,
He came to the world in the usual way.
But there were planes to catch, and bills to pay.
He learned to walk while I was away.
And he was talking 'fore I knew it, and as he grew,
He'd say, "I'm gonna be like you, dad.
You know I'm gonna be like you."

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon,
Little boy blue and the man in the moon.
"When you coming home, dad?" "I don't know when,
But we'll get together then.
You know we'll have a good time then."

My son turned ten just the other day.
He said, "Thanks for the ball, dad, come on let's play.
Can you teach me to throw?" I said, "Not today,
I got a lot to do." He said, "That's ok."
And he walked away, but his smile never dimmed,
Said, "I'm gonna be like him, yeah.
You know I'm gonna be like him."

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon,
Little boy blue and the man in the moon.
"When you coming home, dad?" "I don't know when,
But we'll get together then.
You know we'll have a good time then."

Well, he came from college just the other day,
So much like a man I just had to say,
"Son, I'm proud of you. Can you sit for a while?"
He shook his head, and he said with a smile,
"What I'd really like, dad, is to borrow the car keys.
See you later. Can I have them please?"

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon,
Little boy blue and the man in the moon.

"When you coming home, son?" "I don't know when,
But we'll get together then, dad.
You know we'll have a good time then."

I've long since retired and my son's moved away.
I called him up just the other day.
I said, "I'd like to see you if you don't mind."
He said, "I'd love to, dad, if I could find the time.
You see, my new job's a hassle, and the kid's got the flu,
But it's sure nice talking to you, dad.
It's been sure nice talking to you."
And as I hung up the phone, it occurred to me,
He'd grown up just like me.
My boy was just like me.

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon,
Little boy blue and the man in the moon.
"When you coming home, son?" "I don't know when,
But we'll get together then, dad.
You know we'll have a good time then."

Well, that's a piece of doggerel, you understand, but that's exactly what Solomon is talking about. That you can throw all of your labors and all of your energies into this world and into work and into your job, and you can lose everything, you can lose your home, and you can lose your family, and you can lose your children. John Paul Getty, before his death, said, "I've never known love or what it means to have a friend." Isn't that sad. Isn't that terribly, terribly sad. He had everything the world could ever throw at him, and he had nothing. "Two are better than one." When you find yourself in difficulty, Solomon is saying, two are better than one. For comfort, for assurance, for strength, a three, how does he put it in verse 12, a cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart. You get the picture.

There are lots of lonely people in the world. Have you ever tried to talk to somebody on one of those underground railways, like the Tube in London or whatever in Chicago or New York or somewhere? Have you ever tried to talk to somebody on one of those. You know, they've got their MP3 players, CD players, heads a bobbin', you try talking to them? They'll arrest you. Actually, some of the loneliest people in the world live in the midst of thousands and thousands of other people. I venture to say that some of the loneliest people in Jackson may well be in church this morning. And Solomon is talking about you. You may have your job, you may have your car, and you may have your pension fund, but actually you've got nothing. And you don't have a friend and you don't have a companion.

IV. Life under the sun is not fair. But if you have Jesus, you have

everything.

And there's a fourth picture. Walk on the down the corridor with Solomon and see a picture of people who reach the top. He talks about it in verses 11-13, "A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction." It's a picture of a man whose been at the top, and he's lost his job and he's been usurped by a fresh-faced, pimply, young fellow—and he's out of a job. Some of you know what that feels like to be pushed out when you're in your early forties, and you've been trying to get a job and the world is a hard and unforgiving place when you're in your mid-forties and you've been to the top of the ladder and you're over-qualified and life is hard and life is tough. And a young, wise lad, who seemingly, in this story has just come out of prison and the world is throwing all of their adulations upon him. Life isn't fair.

I'll never forget in 1990, Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of Great Britain, friend of Ronald Reagan and President George Bush, Senior; the "Iron Lady," she was justly called. I remember that picture in 1990; a black car, engine running outside number 10 Downing Street. They'd lost an election and all her friends, her closest friends, had abandoned her; and she was ditched. Within a matter of days, it was all over. And the vivid scene of one who had been a world power coming out, and there were tears in her eyes, and an expression on her face that you had never seen before. She'd made it to the top, but she had also been ditched.

You know, Mr. Pickwick says in *The Pickwick Papers*, he sings, "If I ruled the world, everyday would be the first day of spring." Well, that's a fairy tale, of course; that's not the real world. The world of politics, the world of the CEO, the world of the managing director is a slippery domain. You know, Solomon is describing something that was true 3,000 years ago. Isn't that breathtaking? Because he could have been writing that this morning because the world that Solomon had seen is a world without God; it's a world without Jesus; it's a world without the gospel and it's a sad place and it's and unforgiving and a lonely place.

And there is only one who can make sense of this sin-ridden world, and that is Jesus Christ. And what Ecclesiastes 4 is saying is that there's another kind of life—not life under the sun; not life in this world without God, but life in union and communion with Jesus. Because you may not make it to the top in this world; you may not have all of the baubles and bangles that the world affords, but if you have *Jesus*, you have everything. My friends, I ask you that in all sincerity.

Can you say that this morning? I may not get that next 10,000, I may not get that next 100,000, I may not get that house, I may not get that car, I may not even get that job; but if I have Jesus, I have everything. Because Jesus is all the world to me. And he says to you, my friend, if this is describing you and it's describing your life this morning-- and it may well be describing your life all too clearly--

Jesus is saying to you, “Come unto Me all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” “If you’re thirsty, come to Me and drink,” Jesus says. “Come and feed upon Me.”

Oh Christ, in Thee my soul hath found and found in Thee alone, the peace, the joy, I sought so long the bliss ‘til now unknown. Now none but Christ can satisfy. None other name for me. There's love, and life, and lasting joy, Lord Jesus, found in Thee.

May we find that to be true in our own hearts. Let's sing together hymn number 648,

“My Jesus I Love Thee, I know Thou Art Mine.” Amen.

A Guide to the Morning Service

The Themes of the Service

The focus this morning continues in Ecclesiastes with its theme of futility for all forms of existence “under the sun.” Without Jesus Christ, nothing satisfies in the long run.

The Hymns and Spiritual Songs

When Morning Gilds the Skies

This hymn is one of our congregation's favorites. Written by an unknown German author around 1800, it was translated by Edward Caswall in 1853. The text calls on us to praise Jesus Christ in every circumstance by repeating the exhortation “May Jesus Christ be praised” in a variety of typical situations in Christian experience.

Great Is Thy Faithfulness

This hymn focuses on the adoration of the Triune God, praising Him for who He is and what He does. “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” is a well-known and loved twentieth-century hymn. Thomas Chisholm wrote it, not in a time of extraordinary circumstances or trial, but simply in response to his own Christian experience of the biblical truth of God's faithfulness. It is the official “school hymn” of the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago.

We Gather Together

This hymn is often associated with “Thanksgiving” in America. We sing it today in praise of the Lord who has so richly blessed us. Let us contemplate the

greatness of His beneficence and not merely express our gratitude to Him in song, but also in generosity to the poor and needy. Our benevolent spirit ought to match our sense of the magnanimity of God's gift of mercy to us.

My Jesus, I Love Thee

Written by William Featherstone in 1864, this hymn records the aspirations that we might well feel as we think of the ways the world disappoints and frustrates. It seems as though Ecclesiastes brings us back to this again and again—that only in Jesus Christ can true and lasting satisfaction come. We close our service this morning with this great affirmation of what Jesus Christ means to us and our desire to love Him with all of our hearts.

Sermon

Ecclesiastes 4 isolates for us the problem of what we moderns call the “rat race.” Every generation has known its demands (enslavements) that drain life of all meaning and purpose, that promise much and pay little. The astonishing thing about the Bible is that what we have here in this chapter fits our contemporary society like a glove, but, in fact, is three-thousand-years old! The world is full of expressive governments and systems that, well, simply want to take advantage of you. It may be the company you work for. It may even be your own driving ambition that has lost sight of what is important and what is not. Oppression and exploitation come in many different forms.

One of the themes of this morning's Scripture passage has to do with success (success, that is, as the world defines it). Money! And those who have lots of it. And “successful” people can often be lonely people. Ebenezer Scrooge, in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, was a sad and lonely man until Tiny Tim melted his wizened soul. Howard Hughes ended his days a recluse and somewhat desperate man haunted by his fears of disease. No amount of money could guarantee his death by the smallest microbe. The only relief comes by way of trust in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus is the only certain route to happiness and contentment. In the words of a nineteenth century hymn:

O Christ in Thee my soul hath found,
And found in Thee alone,
The peace, the joy, I sought so long,
The bliss till now unknown.
I sighed for rest and happiness,
I yearned for them not Thee;
But while I passed my Saviour by,
His love laid hold on me.
I tried the broken cisterns, Lord,
But, ah! the waters failed.
Even as I stooped to drink they fled,

And mocked me as I wailed.
Now none but Christ can satisfy,
None other name for me!
There's love and life and lasting joy,
Lord Jesus found in Thee.

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