

# CHAPTER 4

Solomon, having shown the vanity of this world in the temptation which those in power feel to oppress and trample upon their subjects, here further shows,

- I.** The temptation which the oppressed feel to discontent and impatience (v. 1-3).
- II.** The temptation which those that love their ease feel to take their ease and neglect business, for fear of being envied (v. 4-6).
- III.** The folly of hoarding up abundance of worldly wealth (v. 7, 8).
- IV.** A remedy against that folly, in being made sensible of the benefit of society and mutual assistance (v. 9-12).
- V.** The mutability even of royal dignity, not only through the folly of the prince himself (v. 13, 14), but through the fickleness of the people, let the prince be ever so discreet (v. 15, 16). It is not the prerogative even of kings themselves to be exempted from the vanity and vexation that attend these things; let none else then expect it.

## ~~200~~ ECCLESIASTES 4:1-3

### THE PREVALENCE OF OPPRESSION

Solomon had a large soul (~~109~~ 1 Kings 4:29) and it appeared by this, among other things, that he had a very tender concern for the miserable part of mankind and took cognizance of the afflictions of the afflicted. He had taken the oppressors to task (~~206~~ Ecclesiastes 3:16, 17) and put them in mind of the judgment to come, to be a curb to their insolence; now here he observes the oppressed. This he did, no doubt, as a prince, to do them justice and *avenge them of their adversaries*, for he both *feared God and regarded men*; but here he does it as a preacher, and shows,

- I.** The troubles of their condition (v. 1); of these he speaks very feelingly and with compassion. It grieved him, 1. To see might prevailing against right, to see so much *oppression done under the sun*, to see servants, and

labourers, and poor workmen, oppressed by their masters, who take advantage of their necessity to impose what terms they please upon them, debtors oppressed by cruel creditors and creditors too by fraudulent debtors, tenants oppressed by hard landlords and orphans by treacherous guardians, and, worst of all, subjects oppressed by arbitrary princes and unjust judges. Such *oppressions are done under the sun*; above the sun righteousness reigns for ever. Wise men will *consider these oppressions*, and contrive to do something for the relief of those that are oppressed. *Blessed is he that considers the poor.*

**2.** To see how those that were wronged laid to heart the wrongs that were done them. He *beheld the tears of such as were oppressed*, and perhaps could not forbear weeping with them. The world is a place of weepers; look which way we will, we have a melancholy scene presented to us, *the tears of those that are oppressed* with one trouble or other. They find it is to no purpose to complain, and therefore mourn in secret (as Job, ~~18:13~~ Job 16:20; 30:28); but *Blessed are those that mourn.*

**3.** To see how unable they were to help themselves: *On the side of their oppressors there was power*, when they had done wrong, to stand to it and make good what they had done, so that the poor were borne down with a strong hand and had no way to obtain redress. It is sad to see power misplaced, and that which was given men to enable them to do good perverted to support them in doing wrong.

**4.** To see how they and their calamities were slighted by all about them. They wept and needed comfort, but there was none to do that friendly office: *They had no comforter*; their oppressors were powerful and threatening, and therefore *they had no comforter*; those that should have comforted them durst not, for fear of displeasing the oppressors and being made their companions for offering to be their comforters. It is sad to see so little humanity among men.

**II.** The temptations of their condition. Being thus hardly used, they are tempted to hate and despise life, and to envy those that are dead and in their graves, and to wish they had never been born (v. 2, 3); and Solomon is ready to agree with them, for it serves to prove that *all is vanity and vexation*, since life itself is often so; and if we disregard it, in comparison with the favour and fruition of God (as St. Paul, ~~4:12~~ Acts 20:24, ~~5:12~~ Philippians 1:23), it is our praise, but, if (as here) only for the sake of

the miseries that attend it, it is our infirmity, and we judge therein after the flesh, as Job and Elijah did.

1. He here thinks those happy who have ended this miserable life, have done their part and quitted the stage; *“I praised the dead that are already dead, slain outright, or that had a speedy passage through the world, made a short cut over the ocean of life, dead already, before they had well begun to live; I was pleased with their lot, and, had it been in their own choice, should have praised their wisdom for but looking into the world and then retiring, as not liking it. I concluded that it is better with them than with the living that are yet alive and that is all, dragging the long and heavy chain of life, and wearing out its tedious minutes.”* This may be compared not with ~~<883>~~Job 3:20, 21, but with ~~<643>~~Revelation 14:13, where, in times of persecution (and such Solomon is here describing), it is not the passion of man, but the Spirit of God, that says, *Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth.* Note, The condition of the saints that are dead, and gone to rest with God, is upon many accounts better and more desirable than the condition of living saints that are yet continued in their work and warfare.

2. He thinks those happy who never began this miserable life; nay, they are happiest of all: *He that has not been is happier than both they.* Better never to have been born than be born to *see the evil work that is done under the sun*, to see so much wickedness committed, so much wrong done, and not only to be in no capacity to mend the matter, but to suffer ill for doing well. A good man, how calamitous a condition soever he is in in this world, cannot have cause to wish he had never been born, since he is glorifying the Lord even in the fires, and will be happy at last, for ever happy. Nor ought any to wish so while they are alive, for while there is life there is hope; a man is never undone till he is in hell.

## ~~<200>~~ ECCLESIASTES 4:4-6

### THE PREVALENCE OF OPPRESSION

Here Solomon returns to the observation and consideration of the vanity and vexation of spirit that attend the business of this world, which he had spoken of before, ~~<201>~~Ecclesiastes 2:11.

**I.** If a man be acute, and dexterous, and successful in his business, he gets the ill-will of *his neighbours*, v. 4. Though he takes a great deal of pains, and goes through *all travail*, does not get his estate easily, but it costs him a great deal of hard labour, nor does he get it dishonestly, he wrongs no man, defrauds no man, but by *every right work*, by applying himself to his own proper business, and managing it by all the rules of equity and fair dealing, yet *for this he is envied of his neighbour*, and the more for the reputation he has got by his honesty. This shows,

**1.** What little conscience most men have, that they will bear a grudge to a neighbour, give him an ill word and do him an ill turn, only because he is more ingenious and industrious than themselves, and has more of the blessing of heaven. Cain envied Abel, Esau Jacob, and Saul David, and all for their right works. This is downright diabolism.

**2.** What little comfort wise and useful men must expect to have in this world. Let them behave themselves ever so cautiously, they cannot escape being envied; and *who can stand before envy?* <sup><1774></sup> Proverbs 27:4. Those that excel in virtue will always be an eye-sore to those that exceed in vice, which should not discourage us from any right work, but drive us to expect the praise of it, not from men, but from God, and not to count upon satisfaction and happiness in the creature; for, if *right works* prove *vanity and vexation of spirit*, no works *under the sun* can prove otherwise. But for *every right work* a man shall be accepted of his God, and then he needs not mind though he be *envied of his neighbour*, only it may make him love the world the less.

**II.** If a man be stupid, and dull, and blundering in his business, he does ill for himself (v. 5): *The fool* that goes about his work as if *his hands* were muffled and *folded together*, that does every thing awkwardly, *the sluggard* (for he is a fool) that loves his ease and *folds his hands together* to keep them warm, because they refuse to labour, he *eats his own flesh*, is a cannibal to himself, brings himself into such a poor condition that he has nothing to eat but his own flesh, into such a desperate condition that he is ready to eat his own flesh for vexation. He has a dog's life — hunger and ease. Because he sees active men that thrive in the world envied, he runs into the other extreme; and, lest he should be envied for his right works, he does every thing wrong, and does not deserve to be pitied. Note, Idleness is a sin that is its own punishment. The following words (v. 6),

*Better is a handful with quietness than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit*, may be taken either,

**1.** As the sluggard's argument for the excuse of himself in his idleness. He *folds his hands together*, and abuses and misapplies a good truth for his justification, as if, because *a little with quietness is better than* abundance with strife, therefore a little with idleness is better than abundance with honest labour: thus *wise in his own conceit* is he, ~~2166~~ Proverbs 26:16. But,

**2.** I rather take it as Solomon's advice to keep the mean between that *travail* which will make *a man envied* and that slothfulness which will make a man *eat his own flesh*. Let us by honest industry lay hold on the handful, that we may not want necessaries, but not grasp at both the hands full, which will but create us vexation of spirit. Moderate pains and moderate gains will do best. A man may have but a handful of the world, and yet may enjoy it and himself with a great deal of *quietness*, with content of mind, peace of conscience, and the love and good-will of his neighbours, while many that have both their hands full, have more than heart could wish, have a great deal of travail and vexation with it. Those that cannot live on a little, it is to be feared, would not live as they should if they had ever so much.

## ~~2167~~ ECCLESIASTES 4:7-12

### THE VANITY OF HUMAN WISHES

Here Solomon fastens upon another instance of the vanity of this world, that frequently the more men have of it the more they would have; and on this they are so intent that they have no enjoyment of what they have. Now Solomon here shows,

**I.** That selfishness is the cause of this evil (v. 7, 8): *There is one alone*, that minds none but himself, cares for nobody, but would, if he could, be placed alone in the midst of the earth; *there is not a second*, nor does he desire there should be: one mouth he thinks enough in a house, and grudges every thing that goes beside him. See how this covetous muckworm is here described.

**1.** He makes himself a mere slave to his business. Though *he has* no charge, *neither child nor brother*, none to take care of but himself, none to hang upon him, or draw from him, no poor relations, nor dares he marry, for fear of the expense of a family, *yet is there no end of his labour*; he is at it night and day, early and late, and will scarcely allow necessary rest to himself and those he employs. He does not confine himself within the bounds of his own calling, but is for having a hand in any thing that he can get by. See <sup><ACT></sup>Psalm 127:2.

**2.** He never thinks he has enough: *His eye is not satisfied with riches*. Covetousness is called *the lust of the eye* (<sup><ACT></sup>1 John 2:16) because the *beholding of it with his eyes* is all that the worldling seems to covet, Ecclesiastes v. 11. 5:11. He has enough for his back (as bishop Reynolds observes), for his belly, for his calling, for his family, for his living decently in the world, but he has not enough for his eyes. Though he can but see it, can but count his money, and not find in his heart to use it, yet he is not easy because he has not more to regale his eyes with.

**3.** He denies himself the comfort of what he has: *he bereaves his soul of good*. If our souls are bereaved of good, it is we ourselves that do bereave them. Others may bereave us of outward good, but cannot rob us of our graces and comforts, our spiritual good things. It is our own fault if we do not enjoy ourselves. Yet many are so set upon the world that, in pursuit of it, they *bereave their souls of good* here and for ever, make shipwreck of faith and of a good conscience, bereave themselves not only of the favour of God and eternal life, but of the pleasures of this world too and this present life. Worldly people, pretending to be wise for themselves, are really enemies to themselves.

**4.** He has no excuse for doing this: *He has neither child nor brother*, none that he is bound to, on whom he may lay out what he has to his satisfaction while he lives, none that he has a kindness for, for whom he may lay it up to his satisfaction and to whom he may leave it when he dies, none that are poor or dear to him.

**5.** He has not consideration enough to show himself the folly of this. He never puts this question to himself, "*For whom do I labour* thus? Do I labour, as I should, for the glory of God, and that I may have to give to those that need? Do I consider that it is but for the body that I am labouring, a dying body; it is for others, and I know not for whom — perhaps for a fool, that will scatter it as fast as I have gathered it —

perhaps for a foe, that will be ungrateful to my memory?" Note, It is wisdom for those that take pains about this world to consider whom they take all this pains for, and whether it be really worth while to bereave themselves of good that they may bestow it on a stranger. If men do not consider this, it is *vanity, and a sore travail*; they shame and vex themselves to no purpose.

**II.** That sociableness is the cure of this evil. Men are thus sordid because they are all for themselves. Now Solomon shows here, by divers instances, that *it is not good for man to be alone* (<sup><0008</sup>Genesis 2:18); he designs hereby to recommend to us both marriage and friendship, two things which covetous misers decline, because of the charge of them; but such are the comfort and advantage of them both, if prudently contracted, that they will very well quit cost. Man, in paradise itself, could not be happy without a mate, and therefore is no sooner made than matched.

**1.** Solomon lays this down for a truth, That *two are better than one*, and more happy jointly than either of them could be separately, more pleased in one another than they could be in themselves only, mutually serviceable to each other's welfare, and by a united strength more likely to do good to others: *They have a good reward of their labour*; whatever service they do, it is returned to them another way. He that serves himself only has himself only for his paymaster, and commonly proves more unjust and ungrateful to himself than his friend, if he should serve him, would be to him; witness him that *labours endlessly* and yet *bereaves his soul of good*; he has no *reward of his labour*. But he that is kind to another has a *good reward*; the pleasure and advantage of holy love will be an abundant recompence for all the *work and labour of love*. Hence Solomon infers the mischief of solitude: *Woe to him that is alone*. He lies exposed to many temptations which good company and friendship would prevent and help him to guard against; he wants that advantage which a man has by the countenance of his friend, as iron has of being sharpened by iron. A monastic life then was surely never intended for a state of perfection, nor should those be reckoned the greatest lovers of God who cannot find in their hearts to love any one else.

**2.** He proves it by divers instances of the benefit of friendship and good conversation.

(1.) Occasional succour in an exigency. It is good for two to travel together, *for if* one happen to *fall*, he may be lost for want of a little help. If a man fall *into sin*, his friend will help to *restore him with the spirit of meekness*; if he fall into trouble, his friend will help to comfort him and assuage his grief.

(2.) Mutual warmth. As a fellow-traveller is of use (*amicus pro vehiculo — a friend is a good substitute for a carriage*) so is a bedfellow: *If two lie together, they have heat*. So virtuous and gracious affections are excited by good society, and Christians warm one another by *provoking one another to love and to good works*.

(3.) United strength. If an enemy find a man alone, he is likely to *prevail against him*; with his own single strength he cannot make his part good, but, if he have a second, he may do well enough: *two shall withstand him*. “You shall help me against my enemy, and I will help you against yours;” according to the agreement between Joab and Abishai (~~2~~2 Samuel 10:11), and so both are conquerors; whereas, acting separately, both would have been conquered; as was said of the ancient Britons, when the Romans invaded them, *Dum singuli pugnant, universi vincuntur — While they fight in detached parties, they sacrifice the general cause*. In our spiritual warfare we may be helpful to one another as well as in our spiritual work; next to the comfort of communion with God, is that of the communion of saints. He concludes with this proverb, *A threefold cord is not easily broken*, any more than a bundle of arrows, though each single thread, and each single arrow, is. Two together he compares to *a threefold cord*; for where two are closely joined in holy love and fellowship, Christ will by his Spirit come to them, and make the third, as he joined himself to the two disciples going to Emmaus, and then there is *a threefold cord* that can never be *broken*. *They that dwell in love, dwell in God, and God in them*.

## ~~2043~~ ECCLESIASTES 4:13-16

### THE ADVANTAGES OF SOCIETY

Solomon was himself a king, and therefore may be allowed to speak more freely than another concerning the vanity of kingly state and dignity, which he shows here to be an uncertain thing; he had before said so



(~~1774~~ Proverbs 27:24, *The crown doth not endure to every generation*), and his son found it so. Nothing is more slippery than the highest post of honour without wisdom and the people's love.

**I.** A king is not happy unless he have wisdom, v. 13, 14. He that is truly *wise*, prudent, and pious, though he be *poor* in the world, and very young, and upon both accounts despised and little taken notice of, *is better*, more truly valuable and worthy of respect, is likely to do better for himself and to be a greater blessing to his generation, *than a king, than an old king*, and therefore venerable both for his gravity and for his dignity, if he be *foolish*, and knows not how to manage public affairs himself nor *will be admonished* and advised by others — *who* knows not to be *admonished*, that is, will not suffer any counsel or admonition to be given him (no one about him dares contradict him) or will not hearken to the counsel and admonition that are given him. It is so far from being any part of the honour of kings that it is the greatest dishonour to them that can be not to be *admonished*. Folly and wilfulness commonly go together, and those that most need admonition can worst bear it; but neither age nor titles will secure men respect if they have not true wisdom and virtue to recommend them; while wisdom and virtue will gain men honour even under the disadvantages of youth and poverty. To prove the *wise child better than the foolish king* he shows what each of them comes to, v. 14.

**1.** A *poor* man by his wisdom comes to be preferred, as Joseph, who, when he was but young, was brought *out of prison* to be *the second* man in the kingdom, to which story Solomon seems here to refer. Providence sometimes *raises the poor out of the dust, to set them among princes*, ~~1807~~ Psalm 113:7, 8. Wisdom has wrought not only the liberty of men, but their dignity, raised them from the dunghill, from the dungeon, to the throne.

**2.** A *king* by his folly and wilfulness comes to be impoverished. Though he was *born in his kingdom*, came to it by inheritance, though he has lived to be old in it and has had time to fill his treasures, yet if he take ill courses, and *will no more be admonished* as he has been, thinking, because he is old, he is past it, he *becomes poor*; his treasure is exhausted, and perhaps he is forced to resign his crown and retire into privacy.

**II.** A king is not likely to continue if he have not a confirmed interest in the affections of the people; this is intimated, but somewhat obscurely, in the last two verses.

**1.** He that is king must have a successor, a *second*, a *child that shall stand up in his stead*, his own, suppose, or perhaps that *poor and wise child* spoken of, v. 13. Kings, when they grow old, must have the mortification of seeing those that are to jostle them out and stand up in their stead.

**2.** It is common with the people to adore the rising sun: *All the living who walk under the sun are with the second child*, are in his interests, are conversant with him, and make their court to him more than to the father, whom they look upon as going off, and despise because his best days are past. Solomon considered this; he saw this to be the disposition of his own people, which appeared immediately after his death, in their complaints of his government and their affectation of a change.

**3.** People are never long easy and satisfied: *There is no end*, no rest, *of all the people*; they are continually fond of changes, and know not what they would have.

**4.** This is no new thing, but it has been the way *of all that have been before them*; there have been instances of this in every age: even Samuel and David could not always please.

**5.** As it has been, so it is likely to be still: *Those that come after* will be of the same spirit, and *shall not long rejoice in him* whom at first they seemed extremely fond of. To-day, *Hosanna* — tomorrow, *Crucify*.

**6.** It cannot but be a great grief to princes to see themselves thus slighted by those they have studied to oblige and have depended upon; there is no faith in man, no stedfastness. *This is vanity and vexation of spirit*.