

Ecclesiastes 4:1-6

Introduction:

After giving the universal conclusions to his research in the first two chapters (*vanity of vanity all is vanity*), and the general framework in the third chapter (*there is a time for every purpose under heaven and we can add nothing to or take nothing from*), the book now begins to break things down into different sub-categories that one after another led him to the sweeping conclusions of Chapter One. In the Fourth Chapter lists some categories Solomon discovered that bring vexing troubles to those who live “*under the sun.*” Since they have rejected “*the presence of the LORD,*” and the guidance and wisdom God would give them they are therefore left only with what all the others who “*live under the sun*” can bring them. In this case it is a sad harvest.

- 4:1-3: Because of man’s freewill and selfishness, one can always find grave oppressions and no comforter for those living “*under the sun.*” Under these conditions, one is better off dead or never born if all they seek is to “*live out of the presence of the Lord.*”
- 4:4-6 Those who reach the very pinnacle of success find that unforeseen consequences lead to envy and jealousy on the part of friends, neighbors, co-workers and even family. The great blessings one expected from such success are then completely lost. But those who go to the other extreme and do nothing also find only the vanity of self-destruction. Only those who choose the middle of the road in moderation will find success.
- 4:7-8 Those who become so caught up in the quest for success that they do not take time to create relationship with others fall into a terrible trap/pitfall. At some time in their lives or at the very end, it will become clear that there was no reason or purpose for it all. It was an empty life with nothing at all to show for it.
- 4:9-12 The benefits of gaining the wisdom to make friends and have people who care about you (especially God) far outweigh those of wealth and power. No one knows what tomorrow will bring. Those who rely upon wealth can lose health or through misfortune their wealth. When such things happen those who have friends will have a much better outcome than those who do not. Jesus spoke of this in the context of eternity. “*And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness; that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.*” Lk. 16:9
- 4:13-16 The vanity and futility of political power is also set forth. It is better to be poor and wise (just beginning but full of potential) than a king who is old and foolish (lived his life, but though pride and arrogance no longer able to be corrected and to learn without the love of God this has been the end of the vast majority of mankind. One must always be able to take instruction, but it is more difficult the older one becomes.

1. Then I returned

The natural break between the third and fourth chapter is clearly seen in the term “*then I returned,*” or “*Then I looked again*” (NAS). “*The basic idea of the verb is movement back to the point of departure.*”

shub 7725, “*to return or go back, bring back.*” This verb occurs in several Semitic languages (not in Phoenician-Punic and Ethiopic) including Ugaritic (1550-1200 B. C.) and in all periods of Hebrew. It occurs about 1,060 times in biblical Hebrew and about 8 times in biblical Aramaic (in the form tub). The basic meaning of the verb is movement back to the point of departure (unless there is evidence to the contrary). In the first occurrence of this verb God told Adam that he and Eve would “eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” Gen. 3:19... Used in this emphasis, shub can be applied specifically of returning along a path already traversed... (Vine’s)

He is now “*returning along a path already traversed.*” He briefly touched on this in the previous chapter. He noted that one could not always get justice in the courts because of the wickedness of judges, lawyers, and those who know how to use the law to their own advantage.

Furthermore, I have seen under the sun that in the place of justice there is wickedness, and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness. 17 I said to myself, "God will judge both the righteous man and the wicked man," for a time for every matter and for every deed is there. Eccl 3:16-17

He concluded that even under such circumstances, one must simply go back to the basics and realize "*nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage*" (Eccl 3:22).

But then he took a closer look at this and realized that there will be times when even this "*heritage*" will be stolen from them. After returning, he sees this vexing circumstance that contributes to all being vanity and now discusses it.

and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun:

The term "*consider*" has the meaning of "see," "observe," "perceive," "gain understanding," or "examine."

ra'ah 7200, "to see, observe, perceive, get acquainted with, gain understanding, examine, look after (see to), choose, discover." This verb occurs only in Moabite and all periods of Hebrew. It appears in the Bible about 1,300 times.... Basically *ra'ah* connotes seeing with one's eyes... The word can be used in the sense of seeing only what is obvious: The second primary meaning is "to perceive," or to be consciously aware of... Third, *ra'ah* can represent perception in the sense of hearing something... It can also mean "to realize" or "to get acquainted with"... This verb has several further extended meanings. For example, *ra'ah* can refer to "*perceiving or ascertaining something apart from seeing it with one's eyes,*" ... It can represent mentally recognizing that something is true... The verb means "to distinguish": ... A fourth idea of seeing is "to examine" (Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words)

Thus Solomon affirmed that he had done some extensive research into "*all the oppression that is done under the sun,*" and after "*perceiving or ascertaining something apart from seeing it with one's eyes,*" he now offers some inspired wisdom regarding oppression. He looked at everything that even remotely resembled oppression.

kol- 3605, "all; the whole." ... can be used alone, meaning "*the entirety,*" "*whole,*" or "*all,*"... *kol* can signify everything in a given unit whose members have been selected from others of their kind: (Vines)

He looked at the "*entirety*" and the "*whole*" of human oppression. A look at the full definition of oppression shows what sad areas of human life he pried into.

"To treat with violence and injustice, to load with hard, injurious usage; to bear hard upon a person, in opposition to showing mercy... to oppress by violence or fraud... violence and calumny; something taken away by force or fraud, unjust gain; anguish... distress... an oppressor... pl. oppressions, injuries... forcible exactions... (Wilson p 296)

He looked at all the *violent oppression* which man heaps upon man on the job. He considered the *injurious usage* many children must endure at the hands of harsh parents. He considered the teachers and coaches who *bear hard upon* the students they do not love or care about. He looked at all the ways leaders can use government to "*oppress by violence or fraud.*" The agony, sorrow and bitterness of those who must live under injustice and hard and injurious uses that man devises against his neighbor. The fraud, violence, distress, and injuries man inflicts upon man.

He looked at the whole of it and his heart leaped with compassion and sorrow for them, but because they were living "*under the sun.*" There was no one to right these wrongs. They had become servants of the devil and he cared little for such things.

And look! The tears of the oppressed, But they have no comforter—

One thing Solomon wants driven home! "*Look at this!*" "*Come over here and see this!*" Do not be deceived by the hollow words of the oppressor about it being for their own good. Look at the tears of those who are oppressed! They are crying out in anguish and hurt. But the worst of all this: because they live "*out of the presence of the LORD*" there is no one to comfort them! They have no one to help them. No one feels compassion for them, no one consoles them, takes pity upon them.

When this truth hits home, it ought to lead people to run back to God. God wants to be their comforter, but they refuse Him.

But My people would not heed My voice, And Israel would have none of Me. 12 So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, To walk in their own counsels. 13 Oh, that My people would listen to Me, That Israel would walk in My ways! 14 I would soon subdue their enemies, And turn My hand against their adversaries. Ps 81:11-14

Those who live out of God's presence have no comforter. Multitudes have always lived under grave oppression and still will not come to Him. Yet there is no other! So they have none!

On the side of their oppressors there was power, But they have no comforter.

This is another part of the truth that "*all is vanity.*" Where God rules, oppressors are soon overthrown and removed. But when one lives out of God's presence and without His help or guidance, the oppressor maintains his power through evil and wickedness. With the ability to kill those who are obstacles, bribe others to turn their eyes away, to lie, to cheat, and to use evil as a weapon, they gain great power. Soon they reach a level of might so there is no one left to stop them except God. But God is operating under the truce of mercy and compassion (Rom 3:23-26), and wanting all men to be saved, is longsuffering to all in order that they might not perish but come to repentance (1Tim. 2:3-4; 2Pet. 3:9). There is therefore no one to stop them so they have power. They have the "strength", "force" and "ability" to carry out their oppression.

koach 3581, "strength; power; force; ability." This Hebrew word is used in biblical, rabbinic, and modern Hebrew with little change in meaning. The root is uncertain in Hebrew, but the verb is found in Arabic (wakaha, "batter down," and kwch, "defeat"). Koach, which occurs 124 times, is a poetic word as it is used most frequently in the poetic and prophetic literature. The basic meaning of koach is an ability to do something...." (from Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words)

What a dismal state of affairs was initiated through the rebellion of mankind against God. So many evil things go on that should not be.

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. ... 12 that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. Eph 2:1-3, 12

God has allowed His hands to be tied as the parable of the tares indicates. He cannot act without destroying the wheat. It will be the end of the world before He will act with finality and put an end to all this. Yet even then the oppressed will receive no help if they did not come out from "under the sun" and live for the LORD. If man persists in this rebellion, then what conclusions should be drawn?

2. Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead, More than the living who are still alive.

With no God, no life after this life, no comforter, no hope, then this is the logical conclusion for all "*under the sun.*" It is better to have already lived life and be dead. Multitudes today have also drawn that conclusion! Those living under oppression often take their own life. With no hope and no God, they see this as the only way out! Sadly, this is only true "*under the sun.*" It is the worst possible choice when seen in the light of eternity and judgment.

Yet this is an incredibly strong statement, especially made by an inspired writer, It is better to be dead, than to be living in a time of oppression when there is no comforter. This is also done in order to bring man to repentance, but it is a sobering truth to see that when sin cursed the world such possibilities came to be. To have a world where such things can occur brings great sorrow of a magnitude unimaginable into being.

3. Yet, better than both is he who has never existed,

Again, in the set of circumstances described above, it would be even better never to have been born. This was the same conclusion Job, Jeremiah, and even Jesus drew.

3 "May the day perish on which I was born, And the night in which it was said, 'A male child is conceived.' ... 11 "Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not perish when I came from the womb? ... 13 For now I would have lain still and been quiet, I would have been asleep; Then I would have been at rest Job 3:3, 11, 13

Woe is me, my mother, That you have borne me, A man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth! I have neither lent for interest, Nor have men lent to me for interest. Every one of them curses me. Jer 15:10

The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had never been born." Mark 14:21

When oppression occurs, and there is no hope for removing it, then it is best to not be born. This is what the world has come to many times in the past. It is how it still is in some parts of the world today. It is a sobering thought that such could be the case, but it is certain that there is a time for it, and when that time comes, those who trust in God are the only ones who have any reason for life. All others would be better off dead, never to have been born! But the real truth is much better, it would be better to turn to the Lord.

Who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

This is the reason why it is best not to be born. Those who refuse the true comforter(God) may only see evil. This adjective. describes things that are “bad,” “disagreeable,” “malignant,” “unpleasant,” “giving pain, unhappiness, misery,” “unhappy,” and “hurtful.”

7451 ra` - as an adjective: 1) bad, evil a) bad, disagreeable, malignant b) bad, unpleasant, evil (giving pain, unhappiness, misery) c) evil, displeasing d) bad (used of its kind, land, water, etc.) e) bad (used of value) f) worse than, worst (comparison) g) sad, unhappy h) evil (hurtful) l) bad, unkind (vicious in disposition) j) bad, evil, wicked (ethically) ... 2) evil, distress, misery, injury, calamity a) evil, distress, adversity b) evil, injury, wrong c) evil (ethical) as a feminine noun: 3) evil, misery, distress, injury a) evil, misery, distress b) evil, injury, wrong c) evil (ethical) (BDB)

Those who go out from the presence of the LORD do not simply live as His servants. They lead “evil” lives. They oppress and mistreat others. They gain power over others either through weapons, finances, governments or knowledge. Many misuse their power to create great misery and evil. It is best not to have to see such things.

4. Again, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor.

He now adds a second addendum to the conclusion of the previous chapter. While, Solomon “perceived that nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage” (Eccl 3:22), first oppression and now envy first sully, then destroy the value of hard work and the success that follows it. As he looked at all toil and every skillful work, he saw the “dead flies in the perfumers ointment” that spoiled it. Perhaps he interviewed multitudes of successful men and women. He considered the various types of toil and labor men do. He concluded noted that while man can become very “skillful” in the things that he does, it may bring more harm than good in the end. A “skillful man” has learned to do things “well and rightly adjusted for its proper end and purpose.”

“... to be well and rightly adjusted for its proper end and purpose; to be right and fit, suitable and convenient. ... skill, activity; success, prosperity.” (Wilson p 356)

These are people who have worked long and hard in diligent and careful thought to become the top in their field. What they do when they come to work leads to “success” and “prosperity.” As Solomon reviewed all those who rose to the very top in their fields and who ought to be imitated and praised were instead envied. Even the most lofty goal that multitudes strive for leads to its own set of oppression and sorrow!

Too much success therefore has its own set of troubles for those who live “*under the sun*.” It leads to envy which may first cost one his friends and companions, and in the end lead them to seek to undo all the good that was done. So Joseph’s brothers envied him and ultimately sought to destroy him (Gen 37:11). Pilate saw the same thing in those who sought the destruction of Jesus, “*For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy*” (Mt. 27:18)

This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.

Since the real heritage of mankind is to enjoy and excel at his work, this terrible outcome to one who does well is another reason why “*life under the sun*” is vanity. It is not even safe to become too good at what you do. It will lead to others trying to bring you down (oppression). This makes it a complete waste of time to strive for it. It changes success into failure and actually blurs the line between success and failure. People ridicule and scoff at you if you fail and they ridicule and envy you if you are too successful. They look down on you if you fail and they look down on you if you become too good at what you do.

Thus it becomes vanity and seeking to grasp the wind if one directs his time and energy to seek for great success. It is vanity and a chasing the wind to become so successful that you alienate your neighbors in the process. Therefore be skillful, but be cautious. Do not become so skillful that you raise the ire of your neighbor.

5. The fool folds his hands And consumes his own flesh.

At this point some will simply throw up their hands and give up! But that is the path of the fool. The other extreme offers an even worse outcome. Though your neighbors may not envy you, if you just fold your hands you become a fool. This term for “fool” conveyed a very specific meaning.

kecil 3684, “*stupid fellow; dull person; fool.*” This word occurs in the Old Testament 70 times. All of its occurrences are in wisdom literature except 3 in the Psalms. The *kecil* is “*insolent*” in religion and “*stupid or dull*” in wise living ... They have knowledge of God but do not properly evaluate or understand what they know. (Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words)

Solomon proclaims that regardless of the reason, all who fold their hands in idleness are fools. He had much to say about this “*sluggard*” who consumes his own flesh through his idleness.

The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, but the soul of the diligent is made fat. Pr. 13:4

The way of the sluggard is as a hedge of thorns, but the path of the upright is a highway. Pr. 15:19

The sluggard does not plow after the autumn, so he begs during the harvest and has nothing. Pr. 20:4

The desire of the sluggard puts him to death, for his hands refuse to work; All day long he is craving, while the righteous gives and does not hold back. Pr. 21:25-26

I passed by the field of the sluggard, and by the vineyard of the man lacking sense; 31 And behold, it was completely overgrown with thistles, its surface was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. 32 When I saw, I reflected upon it; I looked, and received instruction. 33 “A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest,” 34 Then your poverty will come as a robber, and your want like an armed man. Pr. 24:30-34

As the door turns on its hinges, so does the sluggard on his bed. 15 The sluggard buries his hand in the dish; He is weary of bringing it to his mouth again. 16 The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can give a discreet answer. Pr. 26:14-16

All who fold their hands together in idleness and will not be moved by reason or counsel will only end up consuming their own flesh. Such an attitude ends in total destruction. One who chooses to do nothing will end up with no self-esteem and no redeeming value to their lives. Since one cannot find happiness “*under the sun*” by becoming so good that they are envied or by being lazy, becoming only a fool consuming his own flesh. So what is the best plan? It is still man’s heritage to enjoy the good of his labor so what is the best way to go about it?

6. Better is a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind.

The best possible course winds between these two extremes. It works and settles for enough with quietness. This quietness is a great blessing for living “*life under the sun.*” The key to this passage centers on the difference between the “*quietness*” of the single handful and the “*toil*” and “*grasping for the wind*” of one who works both hands full. Labor that results in a single handful with “*quietness*” is the most preferable of all goals.

5183 Nachath- 1) rest, quietness a) quietness, quiet attitude ...”

This is the quietness of a calm and serene life. A life without envy and oppression and a life without indolence and sloth. Clearly it is better to have one hand full and be content with that one hand full, than it would be to have both hands full but have to pay for that extra handful with toil and grasping for the wind. The term “*toil*” refers to “*burdensome and troublesome*” labor. It often leads to “*anguish,*” and “*misery.*”

`amal 5999, “labor; toil; anguish; troublesome work; trouble; misery.” (Vine’s)

There is often a fine line between the fool who does not do enough, the wise person who does just enough and the fool who seeks for too much. Those who love the Lord and seek to serve him learn from the Scriptures exactly where this line is drawn. Others stray too far to the one or the other and find that life “*under the sun*” without God is not pleasant.

Remove falsehood and lies far from me; Give me neither poverty nor riches — Feed me with the food allotted to me; 9 Lest I be full and deny You, And say, "Who is the Lord?" Or lest I be poor and steal, And profane the name of my God. Pr. 30:8-9

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going. Eccl. 9:10

Ecclesiastes 4:7-16

Introduction:

Solomon now moves to a second category that led him to the conclusion that all is vanity (empty futility and fruitless and meaningless) while living “under the sun.” The good and joy that the wonderful emotions we possess because we were created in the image and likeness of God have the potential to be as harmful if misused as they are a blessing when used properly. Only by staying in fellowship to God and listening carefully to His advice can these abuses be avoided. But those who leave the presence of Jehovah do not have such safeguards. Ambition, drive, zeal and intensity of purpose are noble and wonderful emotions leading to the joy of success and contentment. Although they lead us to hard work and diligence, they are capable of abuse. It is this abuse that Solomon had assessed and now revealed.

7. Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun: 8. There is one alone, without companion: He has neither son nor brother.

This is the second time he has used this expression in this chapter and continues the thought started at the end of Chapter Three. “*The basic idea of the verb is movement back to the point of departure.*” Although “*nothing is better than that a man should rejoice in his own works, for that is his heritage*” (Eccl 3:22), this is a second thing that completely ruins it.

There are men who are so focused on their work that they have no one in their lives. They have no companions, no friends. Note how the Hebrew expresses this idea with the term “*there is no second*”:

8145 sheniy- second ... a) second (the ordinal number) b) again (a second time) c) another, other (something as distinct from something else). BDB

There is no second anywhere. No one else in this man’s life. He is truly alone, no wife, no children, no brothers, and no friends. He is without anyone who cares about him, and he is without anyone he cares about. There are many who by choice or by chance live their lives alone. They have no wife or children, no friends or colleagues. No one but themselves.

Yet there is no end to all his labors,

In spite of the fact that there is no one that he cares for, he never stops laboring and working. There are people who willingly make this choice. We use the term “workaholic” to describe this type of person. They gain all their self-esteem, joy and contentment from their work. It doesn’t matter how much work is done, nor how many goals are attained, they will always be replaced with other goals and work. They are driven by it. There is no end to it. The definition of this term is very similar to our own. It means “*designated goal, not simply the extremity but a conclusion toward which something proceeds.*” It can also mean “*the ‘boundary’ or ‘limit’ of something*”

gets 7093, “end.” A cognate of this word occurs in Ugaritic. Biblical Hebrew attests gets about 66 times and in every period. First, the word is used to denote the “end of a person” or “death”: In Ps. 39:4, gets speaks of the “farthest extremity of human life,” in the sense of how short it is: “Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am.”... Second, gets means “end” as the state of “being annihilated”: Third, related to the previous meaning but quite distinct, is the connotation “farthest extremity of,” such as the “end of a given period of time”... A fourth nuance emphasizes a “designated goal,” not simply the extremity but a conclusion toward which something proceeds: ... In another emphasis, gets represents the “boundary” or “limit” of something: “I have seen an end of all perfection”... (Vines)

The man has no goals, conclusions, boundaries or limits to his work. Such people becomes slaves. They work 16 or more hours a day, six or seven days a week. They are so focused upon their work, that they see nothing else. They use themselves up in it.

Nor is his eye satisfied with riches.

Not only does he have no limits on his work, but he is never satisfied with the wealth all this hard

work has brought. It begins with “I’m going to work hard until I make my first million.” But they become so accustomed and even addicted to the challenges and joys of the work itself that even when they reach one goal, they are not “satisfied” with it and continue on to the next one.

7646 saba` or saba` - 1) to be sated (with food) 2) to be sated, to be satisfied with, to be fulfilled, to be filled, to have one’s fill of (to have desire satisfied) 3) to have in excess, to be surfeited, ...” BDB

One of the joys of a good meal is that one knows when they are full and then stops eating, completely satisfied and sated. They are no longer hungry, but not so full that they are miserable. This is the benefit of knowing when one is satisfied.

But some who have no one but themselves, are never satisfied. This is the terrible consequence of covetousness. Once it begins there is no end. The goal simply continues to expand, and one is never satisfied. No matter how much money one makes, there is always more work to be done and another goal to replace it. He is never satisfied with the money he makes, and simply continues to make more and put it all away. He works 12-14 hours a day, seven days a week. He is working for the future, but not for the present. Jesus spoke of this type of person in one of His parables:

And He told them a parable, saying, “The land of a certain rich man was very productive. 17 “And he began reasoning to himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’ 18 “And he said, ‘This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 ‘And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.” 20 “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?’ 21 “So is the man who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.” Luke 12:16-21

The very question this man asked in his inner reasoning revealed he had fallen into this very trap! He had reached his goal. The barns he had originally built to fill were now full. Yet he is not ready to take his ease! He sets another goal that will have to be satisfied before he will be willing to take his ease, and finally eat, drink, and be merry. He did not ask himself the right question, and at his death, which occurred that night, found that he had nothing to show for his life’s work. He had not even extracted any enjoyment from it. This is what all men are who lay up treasures for themselves and are not rich toward God.

But he never asks, For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?

He is working like the lowest slave, sacrificing and toiling, laboring long hours with little rest, and never asking himself why? He never stops to think about why and for whom he is doing all of the above. He is not really getting anything from it, for he gets no satisfaction from its fruit. The very question shows the depth of sacrifice he is making. First, he is “*toiling*” to the point of “*anguish*,” “*misery*,” doing “*troublesome work*.”

`amal 5999, “labor; toil; anguish; troublesome work; trouble; misery.” `amal means “troublesome work”; the emphasis is on the difficulty involved in a task or work as troublesome and burdensome...” (Vines)

So the first problem is the amount of effort he is expending. He works so hard that there is anguish and misery in it. Second, he “*deprives*” himself of good.

2637 chacer- to lack, to be without, to decrease, to be lacking, to have a need a) (Qal) 1) to lack 2) to be lacking 3) to diminish, to decrease b) (Piel) to cause to lack c) (Hiphil) to cause to be lacking (BDB)

He is voluntarily depriving himself so that he is “without,” “lacking” and has “a need” of good. He is so intent on the job or goal, that he labors to the point of exhaustion, skipping meals, going without sleep, keeping himself from the things he loves. He never asks why or for whom?

This man labors and toils, he works overtime, he puts his money into the bank, he never enjoys the fruits of his labor, for he is too intent on gaining more and more wealth. The misfortune is in his own mind. From the time he begins this quest until the day of his death when it is all lost to him forever, he never asked himself the most important question: “What is the point to all of this?” Why am I working so hard? What do I hope to gain from putting all this wealth away? I have no one to give it to, there is no one I care about who will benefit from all this labor and toil I am expending. I am not enjoying it myself. What is the purpose to it all? This is the most sobering thought a man can

think and it has led many back in repentance to their God.

Since we will all die and forever leave this world, what is the point to laboring and toiling selfishly all the days of our life? Does it make sense to work this hard and only leave it to a complete stranger? Is all this kind of labor and toil worth the cost? He won't get anything out of it all, and neither will anyone he cares for. Why then is he doing it? There is nothing new under the sun. This might be written of multitudes of people today. Shop owners, salesmen, small business owners and entrepreneurs are all in this boat. The real bitter pill in all this is the fact that they could be doing all this for God and gleaning fruit for eternity! But they never ask why or for whom!

This also is vanity and a grave misfortune.

He is so strongly impressed with the empty meaningless futility of such a life that he repeats it at both the beginning and the end. It is vanity, but it is more than vanity! It is also a "grave misfortune!"

7451 ra` - as an adjective: 1) bad, evil a) bad, disagreeable, malignant b) bad, unpleasant, evil (giving pain, unhappiness, misery) c) evil, displeasing ... 2) evil, distress, misery, injury, calamity..." (BDB)

It is "unpleasant," "giving pain, unhappiness, misery." What a waste! What a waste of valuable time and effort! Why not give one's life to God and receive an eternal reward? Why waste all one's life gaining possessions that one will leave to another they do not even know? It is such a grave misfortune! Such sore travail! Such a sad thing!

But instead of immediately closing with 12:13, he makes a secondary application. One God had observed in the garden of Eden and which the curse had made even more powerful.

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him." Gen 2:18

Those who choose to live alone can fall into the above trap. How does one avoid such a fate?

9. Two are better than one,

If one truly wants to be happy, make some friends. Have people to labor with you. Have a wife, have children, have friends you care about, if possible, make your co-workers your friends. No matter what the circumstances, two are better than one. We need to learn this lesson as early in life as possible. When we are operating only on the basis of selfishness, when we are thinking only of ourselves, when we are not loving the Lord with all our heart soul and mind and loving our neighbors as ourselves, we leave ourselves open to grave peril! There is good reward in one's labor when they make their boss, co-workers, wives and children and neighbors into their friends. Two are better than one.

Because they have a good reward for their labor.

The reason why two are better than one is that there is a good reward for all their labor. What happened above cannot happen if there are always two. There will be good "hire," "wages," and "reward" for what is done.

7939 sakar- hire, wages a) wages b) a reward, pay c) a fare, a fee, passage-money

There are wonderful benefits to be gleaned by cultivating and putting forth the effort to keep one's relationships with others both cordial and warm. The time taken to accomplish this brings far greater blessings than all the toil and effort on the one hand and success and riches on the other. There is a good reward in all the labor of those who do this! This may be the heart of why it is better to give than to receive. Sharing with others is one of the most pleasant things in the world. When we see something beautiful make that a pleasure to share with others and the joy will be multiplied. When we have troubles it is pleasant to share it with others who will give us both sympathy and help.

10. for if they fall, one will lift up his companion.

He selects four illustrations to prove the above truth. First if you fall, there will be someone to lift you up. This can be physical, financial, emotional, spiritual, moral, etc. Those who cultivate

relationships. Who find a good mate, who raise good children, who rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, and who have a close relationship with the LORD are never alone. When problems arise, there is always someone there to help them. It is therefore in the greatest self-interest for all to cultivate others.

But woe to him who is alone when he falls. For he has no one to help him up.

Those who do not cultivate such friends will sooner or later fall, and there will be no one there to help them. When we allow anger, jealousy, greed, lust or other emotions to cause us to push others away from us, we need to learn to see what we are really doing. We are destroying our vital links with safety.

11. Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; But how can one be warm alone?

The second illustration is also so clear it needs little elaboration. On a cold night, when one gets a chill, it is a wonderful blessing to be able to snuggle up near another to keep warm. But again there is a deeper side to this also. Our emotional warmth often needs another to snuggle up to, when we feel lonely, sad, or blue it is such a blessing to have those we can draw near to and be warmed.

12. Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him.

The third illustration centers on the idea of safety in numbers. When someone seeks to destroy or overpower, two can “withstand.”

‘amad 5975, “to take one’s stand; stand here or be there; stand still.” Outside biblical Hebrew, where it occurs about 520 times and in all periods, this verb is attested only in Akkadian (“to stand, lean on”)...

The basic meaning of this verb is “to stand upright.” ... From this basic meaning comes the meaning “to be established, immovable, and standing upright” on a single spot... The verb can suggest “immovable,” or not being able to be moved. ... (Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words)

Two have the ability to “stand upright,” “be established,” and be “immovable.” The also may be physical, but also would apply to many other realms. False witnesses can be stymied if one has another with him. Emotional and spiritual dangers are lessened when we have another to lean upon. The danger of living only for oneself and being caught up in the terrible fate of the man in 4:7-8 can also be avoided.

And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

The final illustration uses the idea behind making a rope or cord. A string may easily be broken alone, but weave three together and it can withstand must more stress. The point is clear. It is better to have many friends and people who love you. It is safer in all respects. If you want to be happy in this life do not seek to go it alone.

So the greatest heritage God has given to man, to enjoy the fruit of his labor is also fraught with peril. If we do too much we will destroy ourselves. If we do not do enough we become a fool and also destroy ourselves. If we allow our desire for success and the enjoyment of work to become so strong we don’t make friends and enjoy companionship we also destroy ourselves. So even the enjoyment of our heritage from God is a straitened and narrow road that few can find.

The final verses of this chapter deal with the emptiness of power, fame

13. Better is a poor and wise youth Than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more.

The term “better” is the standard Hebrew term for what is good, pleasant, and agreeable to the senses. Such is the case of a poor but wise youth, when compared to an old and foolish king who won’t be admonished any longer. One is much more pleasant and agreeable than the other. Although the young man has youth(inexperience) and poverty against him. His youth(strength and enthusiasm) and wisdom makes him much better than the other man. The king is old(experience), but foolish, but worse than that he will not be admonished. The term “wise” is a very important Hebrew term referring to the *“mastery of the art of living in accordance with God’s expectations.”*

This wisdom is a *“process of attainment and not an accomplishment.”*

chakam 2450, “wise; skillful; practical.” This word plus the noun *chakamah* and the verb “to be wise” **signify an important element of the Old Testament religious point of view.** Religious experience **was not a routine, a ritual, or faith experience.** It was **viewed as a mastery of the art of living in accordance with God’s expectations.** In their definition, **the words “mastery” and “art” signify that wisdom was a process of attainment and not an accomplishment.** The secular usage bears out the importance of these observations. **Chakam appears 132 times** in the Hebrew Old Testament. It occurs **most frequently in Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes,** for which **reason these books are known as “wisdom literature”.** ... The first occurrence of *chakam* is in Gen. 41:8: ... The *chakam* in **secular usage signified a man who was a “skillful” craftsman.** The manufacturers of the objects belonging to the tabernacle were known to be wise, or experienced in their crafts Exod. 36:4. Even the man who was skillful in making idols was recognized as a craftsman Isa. 40:20; cf. Jer. 10:9. The reason for this is to be found in the man’s skill, craftsmanship, and not in the object which was being manufactured. Those who were **experienced in life were known as “wise,”** but their wisdom is **not to be confused with the religious usage.** **Cleverness and shrewdness characterized this type of wisdom.** Amnon consulted Jonadab, who was known as a shrewd man 2 Sam. 13:3, and followed his plan of seducing his sister Tamar. Joab hired a “wise” woman to make David change his mind about Absalom 2 Sam. 14:2. Based on the characterization of wisdom as a skill, a class of counselors known as “wise men” arose. They were to be found in Egypt Gen. 41:8, in Babylon Jer. 50:35, in Tyre Ezek. 27:9, in Edom Obad. 8, and in Israel. In pagan cultures the “wise” man practiced magic and divination... Exod. 7:11; and ... Isa. 44:25. The **religious sense of chakam excludes delusion, craftiness, shrewdness, and magic.** **God is the source of wisdom, as He is “wise”**... Isa. 31:2. The man or woman who, **fearing God, lives in accordance with what God expects** and what is expected of him in a God-fearing society is viewed as an integrated person. **He is “wise” in that his manner of life projects the fear of God** and the blessing of God rests upon him. **Even as the craftsman is said to be skillful in his trade, the Old Testament chakam was learning and applying wisdom to every situation in life, and the degree in which he succeeded was a barometer of his progress on the road of wisdom...** The opposite of the *chakam* is the “fool” or wicked person, who stubbornly refuses counsel and depends on his own understanding: ...Pr. 1:32; cf. Deut. 32:5-6; Pr. 3:35. (Vines)

The wisdom of this youth made him “better.” The king had held all the honor and power that rule brings, but he was “foolish.” This king is *“insolent’ in religion and ‘stupid or dull’ in wise living.”* He has the *“knowledge of God,”* but does not *“properly evaluate or understand”* what he knows.

kecil 3684, “stupid fellow; dull person; fool.” This word occurs in the Old Testament 70 times. All of its occurrences are in wisdom literature except 3 in the **Psalms. The kecil is “insolent” in religion and “stupid or dull” in wise living** (living out a religion he professes).... They **have knowledge of God but do not properly evaluate or understand what they know.** The second emphasis is especially prominent in wisdom contexts: “How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorners delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge?” Prov. 1:22. In such contexts the person so described rejects the claims and teachings of wisdom. However, in the Bible wisdom is the practical outworking of one’s religion. Therefore, even in these contexts there is a clear connotation of insolence in religion. (Vine’s Expository Dictionary)

Not only is he foolish, but he will no longer be “admonished.” He will not listen when others try to “warn,” “teach.” It is used nineteen times in the watchman passages of Ezekiel 3:17-21; 33:3-9.

2094 zahar- to admonish, to warn, to teach, ... 1) to teach, to warn 2) to shine, to send out light (figurative) (BDB)

Anyone, including even a king who will no longer listen to the warnings and teachings of others, truly is “foolish. The great benefits conferred upon the king are often swallowed up and destroyed with such folly. Pride and arrogance have led to such stupidity and dullness. Rehoboam would not listen to the counsel of the old men and lost the ten tribes to Jeroboam. Jeroboam would not listen to the young prophet and continued in his ways. The greatness and power conferred by being a king is something to be carefully pondered and even feared.

The Holy Spirit’s verdict here is that a young, poor wise man is better than such a king.

14. For he comes out of prison to be king, Although he was born poor in his kingdom.

The pronoun “he” can refer to either the king or the poor young man of the previous verse. Both can and do happen. A wise but poor young man can indeed grow up to be an old and foolish king who will no longer be admonished. An old and foolish king who will no longer be admonished can indeed be supplanted by a wise but poor young man. Perhaps the passage is such an enigma to leave both possibilities open.

This is definitely starting at the very bottom. When someone can come out of prison or be born poor and end up as the king, then “*life under the sun*” can hold limitless possibilities both good and bad. Anyone can become a king, and anyone can supplant an existing king. Power does not confer stability.

15. I saw all the living who walk under the sun; They were with the second youth who stands in his place.

Public opinion is also transitory. They can hold with the king, or they can hold with the youth who stands in his place. The fickle nature of fame and popularity have toppled so many dynasties and kings. A history of France or England, as well as a careful reading of Kings and Chronicles will convince anyone of this.

In this case all the living were with the second youth. Who now stands in the place of the first youth who has grown old. Do you think the second youth will learn from the first whom he replaced? Verse 16 does not give one much hope that this will be the case.

16. There was no end of all the people over whom he was made king;

The power and greatness of this poor youth who came out of prison and in humility and wisdom began reigning well over these people has no limit. He is reigning over multitudes. One would think that such a man would be invincible. He is reigning over such a great multitude, and they love him.

It is important to remember that this is exactly what happened to the man who is writing this book. He grew old and refused to be admonished regarding the folly of his activities with idols. He was supplanted by Jeroboam who was young, and the majority stood with Jeroboam. Yet Jeroboam’s reign ended even worse.

Yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him.

But this will not stay constant. When he grows older, those who live in the next generations and do not remember all that was done in the beginning will not rejoice or feel good about him. There is nothing one can do about such things. They simply reveal the empty nature of power, might and glory from men.

Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind.

There is nothing permanent in all this. It too is empty, futile and meaningless. There is no stability to it. It cannot be held fast and kept permanently. It is transitory and slippery. Like the man who tries to hold the wind in his hand.