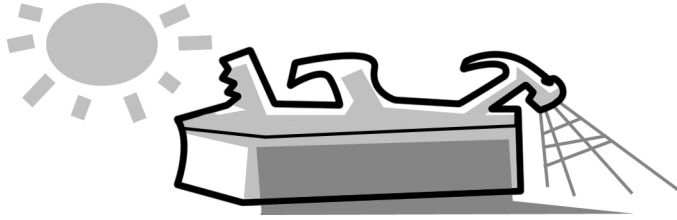


More Life Under *the* Sun



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 4.*

Memory Text: “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (*Galatians 6:2*).

As we begin this week, you’ll perhaps notice something interesting, something that commentators have written about over the ages. Ecclesiastes starts to sound more and more like the book of Proverbs. Proverbs is often a series of short little sayings that deal with practical knowledge about daily life, though not always necessarily in an order that is easy to follow.

Take, for instance, Proverbs 6, which begins with some thoughts about work, such as “Go to the ant, thou sluggard” (*Prov 6:6*), followed by words about a “naughty person” (*vs. 12*), to a warning about the six things “that God hates” (*vs. 16, NKJV*), to words about obeying parents (*vs. 20*), and finally to a warning about the dangers of wanton women (*vss. 24-35*).

We can see some of this same style in Ecclesiastes 4, where Solomon covers a number of issues, everything from the oppression that many people suffer from to the meaning of life, to the issue of envy, then to questions about the purpose of work, and finally to ideas of community and fellowship. Though oftentimes his sentences are sharp, to the point, very poetic, and without much elaboration, they touch on larger themes that can be explored in a number of ways that have relevance to us even today. Let’s take a look and see what the Lord is saying to us here.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 3.*

The Oppressors

Read Ecclesiastes 4:1-3. Rewrite in your own words what Solomon is saying.

Solomon is, again, looking at life from a worldly perspective, from “under the sun.” These words, though, are somewhat interesting when you consider who is writing them: the king himself. It would be one thing if a slave were bemoaning his fate at the hands of his or her masters or if a poor person were lamenting his or her fate under the oppression of the rich. But in this case, you have the richest and most powerful leader in the nation complaining about injustice and oppression.

We tend to think of oppression usually in the context of politics or wealth. There are, though, other ways people can be oppressed. What about husbands and wives, or parents and children? What about religious oppression, the use of religion to oppress and exploit others? Or what about employers and employees? Or sexual harassment; is not that a form of oppression? What other kinds can you think of? Could someone be an oppressor without even realizing it? Look up the following texts. What principles are found there that, if applied, would protect someone from falling into that role, even unwittingly? *Mark 10:43, 44; 1 Cor. 9:19; Phil. 2:3; 2 Tim. 2:24; 1 John 3:16; 4:11.*

Power can be a subtle thing. Used correctly, it can be a great blessing, for with power one can guide, even command, others in the right direction. It’s also a very easy thing to abuse. As has been said, “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Most of us, in one way or another, have power over others. The crucial question is how do we use it?

Look at yourself. What kind of power do you exert? How well are you following the principles expressed in the texts for today? What changes might you need to make in order to make sure you’re not abusing that power?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

▶ **Key Text:** *Galatians 6:2*

▶ **Teach the Class to:**

Know: Our fellowship with God enhances our fellowship with one another.

Feel: The sense of belonging that comes from being adopted into God's family.

Do: Celebrate the relationships that give meaning to life: family, friends, fellow Christians, even strangers.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. Better Off Dead? (*Eccles. 4:1-3*)

A Most of us know God's love and see it reflected in people and situations around us. Even so, rampant evil sometimes causes doubt. How do you deal with doubt?

B What tangible steps can Christians take to help solve the oppression in the world? What did Jesus do?

II. Quality of Life (*Eccles. 4:4-6*)

A Some professional athletes, movie stars, and CEOs make more money in one year than we'll ever see in our lifetimes. With whom should we compare ourselves instead, and why?

B Read Ecclesiastes 4:6. Give a modern example of what Solomon is saying.

III. Legacy (*Eccles. 4:7-12, 13-16*)

A Is there someone in your congregation who could use a little more tender loving care? How could you as a class, or as an individual, make him or her feel more appreciated?

B Is verse 13 autobiographical? If so, what do you think Solomon would change about his past if he could? What would you change about yours?

▶ **Summary:** While we may not be able to undo our past, thanks to God's forgiveness, we can move forward into a guilt-free future.

Is Life Worth it?

“Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive. Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun” (Eccles. 4:2, 3).

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”—Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 3.

However differently phrased, both quotes touch on a similar question: Is human life worth the bother? Considering all the pain, suffering, and disappointment that go into living, and we still die anyway—is life worth it?

The answer, ultimately, depends upon your view of what the meaning of life is. If one takes the position that our life here is capped and culminated at death and that nothing comes after, you will have one view. If you believe that this life is only a temporary stop on the way to something better, something eternal, then you will have another view. Thus, in many ways, the answer to the question Is life worth it? depends, ironically enough, on the question of death. Is death the end or only the end of the beginning?

Write out your answer to the question Is life worth it? Give a yes or no answer and then defend your position the best you can, using whatever Bible texts you deem necessary. Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners' experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: **Why is this lesson important to me?**

Most of us have heard some form of a fable about the parts of the body quarreling among themselves. The way we usually hear it, parts such as the hands, mouth, teeth, and tongue get jealous because the stomach is getting all the potatoes and gravy. So, the other body parts stop getting the food to the stomach. Of course, after the stomach complains a while, things seem to settle down for a short while. But then, the “striking” body parts find themselves losing energy and motivation as nourishment quits reaching them. They finally realize that the stomach was not just living off of what they provided, doing nothing itself.

Imagine this phenomenon another way as well. If the stomach did take in and take in, never giving back to the rest of the body, what would happen? It would no longer be serving the function for which it was designed. Putrefaction and death would result.

Just as it is true that some body parts cannot just live off of the work of others, it is also true that no body part can keep good things just for itself, without providing some blessing in return.

Consider This: Read Romans 12:4, 5 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. In the light of these verses, and the illustration above, a central concept for this lesson might be, A meaningful life in Christ will be ever more others-centered and less self-centered.

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: **What do I need to know from God's Word?**

C O N T I N U E D 

Envy

Solomon here is on a real roll. After saying, basically, that one is better off not to have ever been born than to live and see all the oppression “done under the sun” (*Eccles. 4:1*), he then delves into another theme, envy (*vss. 4-6*). Fair enough; after all, it’s a worthwhile topic to look at from a biblical perspective. Even one of the Ten Commandments deals, at its root, with the issue of envy (Which one?). Solomon, though, takes it to another level: *All toil and all skillful work is nothing but a person being jealous of a neighbor*. That’s a cynical attitude, to be sure, and though there’s some truth to it, he certainly pushes the problem of envy to an extreme.

Nevertheless, envy is a human problem. In fact, it’s more than a human problem. It was, indeed, the original sin. “Satan was envious and jealous of Jesus Christ. Yet when all the angels bowed to Jesus to acknowledge His supremacy and high authority and rightful rule, Satan bowed with them; but his heart was filled with envy and hatred.”—Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 1, p. 18. Thus, when we start manifesting envy and jealousy, we are reflecting the character of Satan.

Find three accounts in the Bible of where envy played a big role in the unfolding story. Write out the nasty results that this envy brought. What lessons can we learn about the fruit of envy?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

What has been your own experience with jealousy and envy in your own heart? What steps can you take in order to help subdue this beast? Think through the life of Jesus. How, by dwelling on Him, can you, through God’s grace, destroy this sin before it destroys you?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Bible Commentary****I. The Miseries of Both Power and Abuse**

(Review Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 with your class.)

The preacher begins this portion of his presentation by focusing on the equally miserable plights of those who abuse others and those who are themselves abused. These two groups of people cannot be considered in community in any positive sense of the word. When relationships get to this impasse, where one segment of society is drastically oppressed by another, both segments lose. Neither can be happy. And yet, this is the logical conclusion when people do not stay in God-fearing, self-respecting community.

Consider This: In Ecclesiastes so far, what might be an indication that those wielding the abusive power are just as miserable as those who are abused? What evidence in everyday life can lead to the same conclusion?

■ *What usually creates in someone the tendency to be an abuser? to allow oneself to be abused? What types of abuse or oppression are prevalent today? in society? in the church? at home?*

Refer to the texts listed in the Sunday portion of the lesson for further discussion.

II. Envy as a Community Divider

(Review Ecclesiastes 4:4-6 with your class.)

In these verses, which mark the second paragraph within this chapter, the relationship described is one between two relatively close individuals—a person and his or her neighbor (rea: an associate_: also translated as brother, companion, fellow, friend, husband, lover) in *The Hebrew Greek Key Word Study Bible, New American Study Bible* (Chattanooga, Tenn.: AMG International Inc., 1990), p. 109, no. 7453. This relationship becomes unbalanced by covetousness (*see Exod. 20:17*). And this covetousness drives a person to labor or work that becomes a burden “amal: toil, i.e. *wearing effort*; hence *worry*, wheth. of body or mind:—grievance (-vousness), iniquity, labour, mischief, miserable (-sery), pain (-ful), perverseness, sorrow, toil, travail, trouble, wearisome, wickedness,” and even to every “advantageous transaction.”—Page 89.

CONTINUED 

Labor for Whom?

“I have shewed you all things, how that so laboring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive” (*Acts 20:35*).

Read Ecclesiastes 4:7, 8. After attacking all work and skill as nothing but envy, Solomon, in verses 7 and 8, takes another spin on work: What do people work for? In this case, he is talking about someone who is alone, who has no children, no one either to support or to pass on the fruits of his labor. Is he doing all this only for himself? If so, what’s the purpose?

Whatever the immediate context, these verses raise an important question regarding humanity. Oftentimes the most miserable of all human beings are the most selfish, the ones who live only for self and who care only about themselves. Whatever the immediate gains, after a while, as they see how small they are, how fleeting life is, how little they matter in the scheme of things “under the sun,” such people find so little purpose, so little meaning, to their existence. As human beings we were not meant to live only for ourselves; on the contrary, the whole purpose of selfless love, as exemplified in the life of Jesus, is to live in order to help others. There’s a sense of fulfillment, of joy, of purpose when one gives of oneself for others. And the good news is that you don’t have to be married or have children in order to do this. As long as there are human beings around, there will be people to whom you can be a blessing, and by blessing others you receive a blessing for yourself.

Look up the following texts. What message do they have for us, as followers of Christ, in regard to issues raised in today’s lesson? *Matt. 25:31-46, Mark 10:45, Acts 2:43-45, Heb. 13:1-3.*

What are your priorities? How much time do you spend thinking only about yourself and your own needs, in contrast to others and the needs of others? Be honest. How well are you fulfilling the Bible call to live not just for yourself but for others?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: What character attributes that are applauded by society can possibly be disastrous for good relationships?

■ *When can work done in helping professions be done from the wrong motives?*

■ *How can the envy and rivalry described in verses 4-6 lead to the abuse and oppression described in verses 1-3?*

► **STEP 3—Practice!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the learning cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**

Thought Questions:


- 1 Why is having a strong, positive concept of who we are in Christ imperative to our living a life more others-centered and less self-centered?
- 2 How can our not understanding who we are in Christ lead to abuse and misuse of power?
- 3 What is implied by the popular word *workaholic*?
- 4 How might working for one's own good, and not in reference to community, deprive someone of "pleasure" (*Eccles. 4:8, NASB*), or "good" thing (*KJV*), or "enjoyment" (*NIV*)? Take time to explore two or three scenarios.

Application Questions:

- 1 What are some things that can cause us to focus on our work and getting ahead in our careers to the exclusion or detriment of meaningful relationships?
- 2 What are some of the common work-related erosions of relationships that we may experience?

Witnessing

Are there weekly small group options offered at your church to help members in focusing on God and on one another instead of focusing six straight days a week on careers and cares?

CONTINUED 

The Cord and Community

Solomon, in verses 8-12 of Ecclesiastes 4, has moved toward another thought in a fairly logical progression: from living only for oneself to the advantages of community. Though he's talking in a very poetic manner and uses a few specific examples of how much better two are than one, the general point is important: As human beings, we were made for community. We were made to live in contact with others. We were made in a way that we need others.

In 1998, a landlord entered the Bonn, Germany, apartment of Wolfgang Dircks when rent invoices to Dircks's bank stopped being paid. The landlord found a skeleton—a skeleton!—in a chair in front of a television set that, though broken, was still on. Just as incredible was that Christmas lights on his tree were still blinking; near his chair was a TV program guide from December 5, 1993. He probably died that day, and nobody, for at least five years, missed him. Talk about the need for others!

Read 1 Corinthians 12. What point is Paul making that is, basically, the same point that Solomon is making in these few verses in Ecclesiastes?

In the same sense that there is no established “one-man or one-woman physics,” there is no “one-man or one-woman Christianity.” Of course, Christian faith means nothing unless a person has a one-to-one relationship with God. That is crucial. But it's directly out of that vertical relationship, that human-to-God relationship, that a person is also established in a relationship with a community, a church.

It's common to hear people say “I want nothing to do with organized religion.” Well, what do they want, disorganized religion? No, of course not. Instead, that line is often a cover for people who don't want the commitment or responsibility or even the submission that comes from being part of a group that's bigger than themselves.

How well do you relate to your local church community? What can you do to be a more active participant, using your gifts to help those who don't have what you do? At the same time, how willing are you to go to the church and seek help for something that you can't do on your own?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**Role-Play**

Depending on the size and climate of your class, you might ask small groups to prepare a short role-play relating the concept of quarreling body parts to actual misunderstandings within your church. At the close of the role-plays, attempt to pinpoint the real underlying issues at play in the situation.

► **STEP 4—Apply!**

Just for Teachers: In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question: **With God’s help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?**

“Be on guard, that your hearts may not be weighted down with dissipation [“a headache (as a seizure of pain) from drunkenness.”—James Strong, “New Strong’s™ Concise Dictionary of the Greek Testament” in *The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, p. 51, no. 2897] ‘. . . and the worries of life, and that day come on you suddenly like a trap; for it will come upon all those who dwell on the face of all the earth’ ” (Luke 21:34, 35, NASB).

This week’s central concept is, A meaningful life in Christ will be ever more others-centered and less self-centered. Another way to say this is, A meaningful life in Christ is one of worry-free humility and childlike trust in Him.

Consider This: How is it possible to equate the two sentences (concepts) above?

This week, how can the second version of the central concept guide our (1) power struggles with others at home and at work, (2) tendencies to work too hard for the wrong reasons, and (3) self-focus rather than community-focus?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, pp. 261–265; *Testimonies to Ministers*, pp. 29, 30.

The writer Kurt Vonnegut once said: “What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.”

Koinonia is the Greek word for “fellowship.” As humans we were created for community, for fellowship, for human interaction. But not just any kind of interaction. After all, if you want human interaction you can go to a bar or to a football game and interact with others. No, the biblical idea is human interaction of a different kind, an interaction arising out of a community of people who, out of their love for God, have covenanted to love and care for and help each other. People sharing common views, common goals, common dreams, and a common purpose—but most of all, people who care about each other and who are dedicated to helping each other, regardless of their needs. That’s what Christian community should be about.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 As a class, discuss this important question: How well does your local church function as a community? How well does it work together to meet the needs of its members, whatever those needs are? Assess the areas where your church is strong and where it is weak. What can you all do, as a class, to help your local church fulfill its role as a community of believers grounded in love for God and love for each other?
- 2 Read aloud and discuss your answers to the question Is life worth it?
- 3 Discuss more this question of power and how power is wielded. In what subtle ways can someone abuse power; at the same time, what problems can arise when someone doesn’t use the power they have been given?