

## **A Guide To The Reader**

*Pastor recommends that to obtain maximum benefit from his comments you read in full from the Bible every reference whenever one appears. Otherwise the reading of the comments is simply a skimming over the surface. They are rather designed to make you stop and meditate and even look up further references as the Holy Spirit guides you. Do pray before you read that the Holy Spirit will be your Tutor and that the time you spend will be time spent with Him.*

### **Ecclesiastes 4**

4.1. Returning to the theme of vanity, Solomon turns to a different line of thought. This time he begins with the subject of oppression. Oppression is never far away; children meet it first with bullying and thereafter it crops up in various forms of hassle. Twice he uses the expression, “they had no comforter” as something that moved him to the depths of his being. It is gracious of the Lord Jesus Christ to send us another Comforter, the Holy Spirit, in His physical absence (John 14.16). He knows how His followers would need the comfort which the Holy Spirit brings, not only in the ordinary matters of life but also in the specific oppressions which come upon Christians as such. The days following Solomon would illustrate in the life of the Jewish nation that power was on the side of the oppressors – but these powers were always under the direction of God Himself (Isaiah 14.4).

4.2. But what a conclusion the backslider came to. Better to be dead. Life is so wonderful and full of marvellous capacities that it is the savour of a fatal disease to make life seem worse than death. It is a development of this way of thinking which leads people to say that the dead are at rest. The condition of a dead unbeliever can scarcely be described as rest. Rest from labour it may be but they shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever, being identified in the lake of fire with the devil himself (Revelation 20.10,15).

4.3. This is a weird thought, unless we conclude that Solomon is referring to one who will never be born, seeing that one who is yet to be actually born will experience all the things of which he has been speaking. Better not to be born! Simply to have no life at all, no awareness of any sort, to be a being not in existence, is better than living. These are desperate thoughts and show where unbelief leads. In the earliest days of Job’s mourning and affliction he gave vent to such thoughts as these, of which Solomon may well have been aware. He wishes that he had not been, as a hidden untimely birth, as infants which never saw light. Read Job 5.11-19 but realise that as yet Job had not come to a knowledge of eternal life and was in the midst of his anguish and pain. In the midst of grief even the faithful believer might give way for a time till his emotions recover.

4.4-5. If work isn’t bad enough, envy of our gifts and accomplishments adds to its drawbacks. It is foolishness to respond by giving up, for then we starve.

4.6. In our study of the book of Proverbs I listed the ones in that book and this which commenced with “Better.” This individual proverb seems to be Solomon’s conclusion to the balance between work on the one hand and idleness for whatever reason on the other. Sufficiency without shortage; sufficiency without surplus is the middle way he rightly

encourages. “Be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee” (Hebrews 13.5). Expansion is the rule of selfish personal profit; true profit would be to walk with God.

4.7-8. In returning to his theme of vanity, Solomon now turned his attention to singleness, perhaps allied to loneliness. It is a haunting verse, “There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet there is no end of all his labour.” The Lord said, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” The Lord Jesus Christ was single. The Holy Spirit moved Paul to write in 1 Corinthians 7.7 “I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that.” The married state is good; the single state is good. The widow and widower are in the Lord’s care. Even if we have no relations, “neither child nor brother” believers are the apple of the Lord’s eye. But, unless we are legitimately retired, we must all work. Again, it is sufficient to provide for one’s own needs and, if enabled, the needs of the brethren, without being concerned for posterity. It is the one who is amassing wealth who is concerned particularly about what will happen to it after his death, as Jesus notes, “then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?” (Luke 12.20).

It is a true observation that though there is no end of labour yet there is no satisfaction in its provisions beyond that of the necessities of livelihood.

4.9-12. Four reasons are given for the advantage of joint efforts; not only the partnership of marriage but of business and other affairs also. In principle these reasons might be said to hold good (at least in part) for joint enterprises of teams, corporate businesses and nationhood but this is not the subject here.

The first reason is that joint enterprise more than doubles the result of the output, as when we say that the team is more than the sum of its parts. In the example of the married life children are that good reward together with happy family life. The second is the support that one will give the other in adversity as illustrated by the situation of a fall in which life might be endangered if help were not soon forthcoming. The third is that of mutual warmth when it is cold at night, which is an example of mutual encouragement and comfort. Fourthly when there is opposition two may see off a threatened or actual physical attack. In such circumstances the help of a third might be enlisted; and while, as we say, “two’s company, three’s a crowd” and a third should not be admitted into the most intimate relationships which the world describes as “the eternal triangle,” there are occasions nevertheless when a third party will truly be of invaluable assistance.

4.13-14. There is here a triple contrast; between a king and one who is poor; between a wise person and a foolish; and between a child and an old man. Better to be poor, wise, and as young as a child than to have the riches and authority of a king who has grown foolish with age and will not be advised. The situation is envisaged in which an imprisoned child might be liberated even to sovereignty, whereas the land of those who live under an aged and ill-advised monarch becomes impoverished. If the Lord Jesus Christ shall make His children free, they shall be free indeed (John 8.36). “The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens...He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth the needy out of the dunghill; that he may set him with princes, even with the princes of his people” (Psalm 113.4,7-8).

4.15-16. "I considered all the living which walk under the sun." "There is no end of all the people." If monarchy has drawbacks so has democracy. In a possible allusion to this verse, the poet Dryden writes,

"Crowds err not, though to both extremes they run;  
To kill the father and recall the son."

A crowd is fickle; a monarch may be fickle. Without the wisdom of Christ the government of a nation, or the government of our tongues and hearts, is subject to mood. However frustrating these things are, we must still resolutely put our trust in the Saviour that at His coming all will be put right and that the saints will live for ever with Him in blissful separation from all that spoils. "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Revelation 21.4).