

Struggles, Part 2

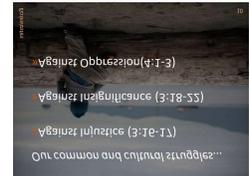
Ecclesiastes 4:4-16

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There are many things that we struggle with and under. We have already seen three important ones.

- » The Struggle for Justice (3:16-17)
- » The Struggle for Significance (3:18-22)
- » The Struggle of the Oppressed (4:1-3)



These are things we tend to struggle against.

But there are also the things we struggle for.

The beautiful posters that remind us and inspire us to... achieve.

The hope in our hearts for happiness and success... it is universal.

The struggle to achieve what we aspire and hope for... it is daunting.



Christian realism can look with clear-eyed understanding on three struggles in life. These three struggles often clearly reveal a person's deep heart motivations. These may lead to God-pleasing pursuits and enjoyments. Or they may lead to deep disappointments, frustrations and despair.

The Struggle for Wealth (4:4-8)

Often people are oppressed because of the pursuit of power and wealth. The statements are given in the form of proverbs. They seem to be declaring universals but the writer and we know that sometimes life does not conform or comply with our universals.

⁴ Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

⁵ The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.

⁶ Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

Its Universal Presence (v. 4)

If all the effort we put into work is a result of envying neighbor, then, yes, this is grasping after wind. Why? Well if no other reason, my neighbor is also doing all he does out of envy of me or some other neighbor. While envy drives much striving after wealth, it is

not always the reason. There are many heart motives for seeking after this world's treasure.

What Solomon has observed is that envy often drives our pursuits. It is a powerful and subtle motivator. Neighbor here may not be the family next door. It could be a family member, a boss or a colleague. It could be someone at church. For many in business, envy of another business. In church, envying another church. In countries, envying another countries success or wealth.

So, in all our pursuing wealth, we must be so very aware of our own heart's craving.

Its Differing Products (v. 5-6)

There is a play here on "hands" and "stillness". Some not toiling and striving after wealth is not to be commended.

The Hands of Laziness (v. 5)

The picture here is of hands folded across the chest of someone reclining at ease. But it is the ease of laziness. The hands of the lazy are folded and at rest. There is no striving, no toiling here. The lazy person is quite satisfied to go with the flow. They see no season or time or reason for hard work.

The effect is self-destruction. Laziness does not lead to long term health or strength. The indolent soon become weak in body, mind and soul. Laziness is disease of the heart that soon spreads to the body and leads to dissolution. The person who refuses to work consumes the work of others and eventually will consume himself.

The Hands of Labor (v. 6)

What is commended here is a quiet heart and working hands. Too often oiling and working is the result of a heart that is restless and ill at ease. It is a heart and mind that is uncomfortable with peace. It is a person who believes they are what they do. The confuse their identify with their productivity. Their meaning in life and measured by the significance of what they produce. The sad thing is that toiling hands, restless grasping and doing are actually grasping at the air. It is once again the weary man standing in his workshop clutching and grasping at nothing.

I love the picture Solomon draws for us. Instead of hands restless moving from task to task, tool to tool, the hands are filled with quietness, with a steady peace. Quiet hearts make for quiet hands. This reflect the hearts that lives out their identity in what they do. Strong affirmations of who I am according to God's Word make the toil and work I do my servant, not my master. A handful of inner quietness is better than an envious heart driving restless and useless toil.

Its Forlorn Pointlessness (v. 7-8)

⁷ Again, I saw vanity under the sun: ⁸ one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity and an unhappy business.

The struggle for wealth can be vain or empty if there is no one to give it to. In the Jewish culture and Mosaic Law, the accumulation of money and property was an important matter for the family. The laws were designed to protect the passage of an inheritance on to children. It kept property within the family and returned it to the family 70th year. But Solomon sees the sad and forlorn emptiness of accumulating wealth if you have no one

to pass it on to. He has already addressed the emptiness of piling of wealth for yourself. What will happen when you die? You will leave it all behind. So accumulating treasure makes some sense if you have sons and daughters to leave it to. But how vain and empty it is to pile up wealth when you can't keep it yourself when you can't pass it on to children.

Derek Kidner neatly summed up this section when he writes, "This picture of lonely, pointless busyness, equally with that of jealous rivalry in verse 4, checks any excessive claims we might wish to make for the blessings of hard work. Not with this – though still less with the idleness of verse 8 – lies the answer to frustration." [Kidner, p. 46].

The Struggle for Companionship (4:9-12)

Not all struggles are empty and vain. Here is the power of two. It may be two friends, companions or colleagues. But it is not just any two, but also surely the two of a marriage. The struggle here is not against someone but struggling in life with someone.

⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰ For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! ¹¹ Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? ¹² And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken

A Mutual Reward (v. 9)

For their toil and struggle in life, there is shared sweetness of the reward. Each of the two participates in the goodness that comes to the other. And when God gives the good that comes in this world they share in it.

A Mutual Assistance (v. 10)

In the struggles of life, there is a mutual assistance and help. We can rescue one another. When one is down and discouraged, the other can lift them up. Even when both are down, there is a joy and care in listening and lifting one another up.

A Mutual Comfort (v. 11)

The sense here is that of comforting and holding one another. Warmth is the practical effect. But what is implied here is a sense of comfort, security and safety. Two together can reach out in to help when the realities of life overwhelm.

A Mutual Defense (v. 12)

In the struggles of this life, standing for and standing with one another is a good thing. In many times and many places the threat of physical danger is very real. There is also the social and relational attacks that is so helpful to have someone come to our aid and defense.

While these seem to focus on marital companionship and the mutuality that is in it, there is also a kind of companionship among friends and Christians that expresses this. Christ is the greatest friend and brother who fully and perfectly represents all of these.

The Struggle for Leadership (4:13-16)

We do not know who Solomon is referring to here. He may not be referring to a living person at all. Since he does not say and since it could be a composite of several, it is best not to speculate. It is best to listen and learn how the struggle for leadership often unfolds.

¹³ Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. ¹⁴ For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. ¹⁵ I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. ¹⁶ There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.

The Problem Identified (v. 13)

Here is the person. Here is the comparative. It is better to be poised to listen to advice, than to grow old and think you know it all. The folly of the king is in his inability to take advice. This is a problem with many in leadership. They reach a point where they are too senior, too knowledgeable, too... well, foolish to listen to others.

The History Related (v. 14-15)

The history invokes several people in Israel's history. It is easy to hear Joseph and David. There is even a hint of Solomon himself. It is a composite of several. The king will rise from among the people. But the point is to look forward. There will one day a future king who will go from poverty to the throne. He will not be an old and foolish king. He will rise to rule and all the peoples will stand and worship before His throne.

The Results Observed (v. 15-16)

The human king comes to an end. He may rule over a vast nation. But they too will come to an end. His rule sometimes is not even remembered. The impermanence of human rule is both a blessing (bad kings die) and a bane (good kings die). This also is just the real world.

But all this makes us long for the permanence and purity and power of our true King.

Reflect and Respond

The essence of these struggles is between whether we will live for others or live for ourselves. When our life is about self-pursuit we are doomed to depression. There is no finding oneself in a search for one self. We are truly greatest when we lose ourselves in others.

Listen to the words of one wise writer:

I want you to notice what the Preacher is not saying. You might expect him to say that if you live for others, then you'll be more spiritual. Or more godly. You'll be a growing Christian. It is certainly true that you will be all those things, but that is not the aspect of life that the Preacher is painting in this part of his book. You will be happier. The word he uses is "quietness" (v. 6). It simply means rest—peace of mind and calmness of soul. It's a word to capture the deep well-being of those who know their place in the world, content with the boundary lines of their life and able to enjoy the fruits of their labors with a cheerful heart. (Gibson, p. Kindle Edition)

Let us be glad for the struggles in our life. They will wean our souls from deep holdings in this world. They will point our eyes to Christ. They will cause us to long for eternity.

How powerful is the pull of wealth to you?

The acquisition of stuff – people spend wealth...

The acquisition of treasure – people save wealth...

The acquisition of money – people give wealth...

The Biblical model is to work so as to give.

How strong are your relationships?

The friendships you cultivate?

The spouse you love?

The future you hope for?

How much trust do you put in leaders?

We ask God for them...

We trust God under them...

We know that they are fallible...

What about your own aspiration for leadership?

Is it submitted to God's providence?

Is it recognizing its temporal but important contribution?

Brothers and sisters, we all strive in this world to achieve and be successful. As long as it is realistic – that is, working hard, submitted to God and not our identity then it is profitable and useful. Otherwise, it is vain, empty and frustrating.

For a moment, what has Ecclesiastes taught us about Christian Realism?

This world is fallen and much in it is empty and meaningless if the End is not taken into consideration.

This present world, under the sun, was designed by God and is under His providential control.

Many good and wonderful things have been given to us in this world to enjoy.

Nothing in this world can fully satisfy us and it will lead to futility and frustration to try.

The life we live and the work we do is meaningless in itself. It is full of meaning and value in relationship to God.

May you leave a divot in life. But know that the grass grows and the next golfer replaces. Swing well.

