

Friendship and Success

📖 Ecclesiastes 4:9-16

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Alright, what's the name of this book? Ecclesiastes. Where does that name come from? The Latin *Liber Ecclesiastes*. What does that mean? "Book of Ecclesiastes." But where does that come from? The Greek LXX. The Jews called this book *εκκλησιαστης*, which meant "member of the assembly." But ultimately that traces back to the original Hebrew *qophelet*. What does this word mean? Well, that's somewhat ambiguous, it has several meanings, but it probably means "the leader of the assembly" or "speaker of the assembly." It was one who convened an assembly in order to instruct them. And therefore, we translate Ecclesiastes 1:1, "The words of the teacher." And what is the teacher wanting to teach us? About wisdom. And what is wisdom? In the Hebrew worldview it is skill in living. The author wants us to be able to live well. And that's why the Jews placed this book among the wisdom literature along with Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Job, etc...All this literature is about learning to live well. It's about day to day life and how you are living that life. This is a book that really gets down to the nitty gritty. It's practical, it's full of application, and that makes it advanced. Books or classes that are doctrinal are not advanced, they are basic because all that doctrine is doing is giving you the fundamentals, the building blocks, the facts, like learning your ABC's, your 1, 2, 3's, the parts of speech, like nouns, verbs, participles, conjunctions, basic math operations like addition and subtraction and multiplication. Those are all building blocks, basics and that's what Bible doctrine is. What's more advanced is when you have to start using those basics, applying them to problems in life, like learning how to communicate with others, how to make an argument, how to speak logically so that people can follow, that is advanced; or when you have to solve some problem that requires the use of addition and subtraction and division and multiplication. When all those things are required to go together in some way called a formula, in order to solve a problem, that is advanced, because it presupposes you already have the basic building blocks and now you are going to have to use them. That's the realm of *qophelet*. He's into advanced issues of how to live life, or rather, how not to. You see, everything he brings to us, almost, is from the human view point, and he doesn't have to explain to you and me human view point, because we were born into it. Every one of us was conceived in sin and so we quite naturally looked at everything from the mere human view point. So there's no necessity of teaching us the basics of human view point. The flesh picks those things up like a kid picks up dirt on his bare feet. It just happens. So the author is telling us how not to live. And who is the author? Solomon. He's the only one who meets all the criteria in the

book, as a son of David ruling over all Israel from Jerusalem. Solomon is the only one who did that and Solomon is teaching us how not to live. And how is he qualified to teach us this? Because he tried it. One of the aspects of wisdom is experience, and Solomon is teaching us from personal experience. He tried all these things and came back with a negative report. Now it's interesting, as some of you have noted, because when he came to reign he told the Lord, I don't know how to come in or go out, I don't know how to rule Your people. And so God gave him wisdom and understanding to rule well. And for many years he did rule well. The kingdom became great and Solomon advanced in wealth and power and renown throughout the ancient world, so much that the great dignitaries of the world had to come to Israel and see for themselves. And it's during this early time that Solomon wrote the greatest love song ever written, a book we ought to study sometime, the Song of Songs, which is a Hebrew superlative and means the greatest song ever written. It's a story told in song of a bride and her groom and it's very beautiful and romantic and erotic and Christians don't read it because they're too prudish to actually believe that God would have something to say about beauty, romance and eroticism. Then Solomon went into middle age and he was still walking with the Lord and he wrote Proverbs. He actually wrote far more proverbs than are captured in the book by the title Proverbs, but the ones that are captured were inspired by the Spirit of God and captured for all time. But as Solomon's wealth and power soared, he entered into treaties with foreign powers in order to make his kingdom more productive and secure. And the bargaining leverage was wives. Solomon married many foreign wives, 700 of them, and these wives brought with them not just their beauty, but their idols. The world outside of Israel was pagan. And these girls were pagan. Solomon was a believer marrying outside the Lord, marrying pagans. He's one of the major examples in Scripture that a believer is not to marry an unbeliever. He's not the first example, I think the first example is Genesis 6, when the sons of God came into the daughters of men. That's not angels, that believing men marrying unbelieving women, and what it was doing was what it always does, it corrupts the truth of the one way of coming to God, through sacrifice. Solomon was corrupted away from this, he wanted to come to God through sacrifice at the Temple but also through sacrifice at all the little temples to pagan gods that his wives had him build. He compromised. And that's when he got into trying everything out from the human view point. Trying to live life under the sun apart from God, as if God isn't there, as if we can make it work and have a good life apart from God. That's what every unbeliever is trying to do. They are trying to act like God's not there and find satisfaction and fulfillment at the same time. Solomon is telling us that's not possible. In fact, he's even telling us that's not possible for a believer. If a believer goes negative, like Solomon did, and tries to go about life and have enjoyment and fulfillment, he's going to end up empty. He can try riches, he can try pleasure, he can try projects, he can try hard work, he can try any or all of those things, and by the end of it all he'll find himself emptier than he was when he first set out. That's the irony of unbelief and trying to live life apart from God. So it's a negative example of how not to live, for the most part, so that we will take this report to heart and avoid the pitfalls of human view point.

Turn to chapter 4. Last time we looked at Ecclesiastes 4:1-8. Here Qoheleth discussed four approaches to labor. There are different approaches to labor. The first approach is 4:4, the industrious man. This is the man with ambition to go out and change the world. He's on fire. He's going to make a difference. So he went out and Solomon observed him and noticed that every labor and every skill the industrious man acquired was simply a result of rivalry between him and other industrious people. They weren't laboring for the glory of God. They weren't laboring for the betterment of mankind. They were laboring to edge out the competition. They were laboring to make more money than the next guy. It was competition merely for the sake of me being #1 and you being #2. This he saw was vanity and striving against the wind. There's not really anything there when it's all said and done. The second approach to labor is 4:5 where we see the idle man. This is the man who doesn't have any ambition at all. He probably had parents who did everything for him. Tied his shoes till he was fourteen. I've noticed there are some crazy things parents do for their children in the name of love. Buy them a new car on their sixteenth birthday. Pay for their college education. These kids never had to lift a finger. So when they go out there in the world they're lazy. Don't know how to work. Don't want to work. Think everyone owes them a living. Just trying to enjoy themselves all the time. Solomon observed this man. The man just folded his hands, sat back, slept in till lunch, mooched off his parents until he finally got to the point that he consumed his own flesh, meaning, he was starving because he had run out of people to mooch off and now he was in a real pickle. The third approach to labor is 4:6, the integrated man. This is the man who has a balanced approach to life. He has one hand full of rest and the other full of labor. He works hard but he knows how to relax and enjoy the fruits of his labor. This man doesn't have all the money in the world, but he does have a marriage and family that work, he doesn't have every luxury of life, but he does have relationships and some joy and he does provide a living for his family. And as far as life under the sun is concerned, this is the best approach. Just from the human view point, this is as good as it gets, because at least it is respecting the order that God put in creation of six days' labor and one day rest. There must be rest. Although if one lived life beyond the sun it would be even better, because he would be following the same model, but he would also be including God in the equation, and that would mean that his labor is paying eternal dividends, and he still is getting rest, and further, the greatest enjoyment of having a relationship with God. So that guy is not really discussed, only the guy who is a humanist who's got his life in balance. But there could be another guy, one who is walking with God with his life in balance and that, of course, would be better. Finally, the fourth approach is 4:7-8, the independent man, and this man will lead us into verses 9ff. The independent man is the man who has ambition, just like the industrious man, but he has greed on top of it. He doesn't want to share anything with anyone else. He is going to do it all himself. He is going to work his fingers to the bone. Solomon saw a man like this and he noticed that the man had no dependents, no son, no brother, and so no one to pass his riches to, and yet he never even thought to ask why he was working so hard and not enjoying the fruits of his labor and had no one to pass it on to! Talk about blind. This man was all work, no enjoyment, and no end to all the work in sight and no one to give it to. This is the worst man of all to be. Solomon concluded that this was emptiness and a grievous way to live.

Tonight we come to 4:9 and Solomon is elaborating on why the independent man is worse off than all three of the other men. He is worse off than them, fundamentally, because he is all alone, no companionship, no friendship. At least the industrious man has employees to work with, at least the idle man has friends to cavort with, at least the integrated man has family and friends, but the independent man has no one. Weirsbe said, "Solomon's experience with the independent man caused him to consider the importance of friendship and the value of people doing things together."¹ In 4:9 he contemplates the production potential of two versus one. **Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor.** This is the source of the old proverb that two hands are better than one. There's nothing like another pair of helping hands. This is true for at least five reasons. First, with two laboring together, production increases. Two working together can get more work done in the same amount of time than one working alone. I'm sure you have experienced this. I'm sure there are many times you wish there was someone else there because then you could really whip out a job. Two can do more work and faster work than one. Second, with two working together, production ability. In other words, there are some jobs that one person can't do. You need two people to do it. I have this problem at home all the time. I need someone else because I've only got two hands and I need three or four. So some tasks call for another person. Therefore, production ability increases with two people. Third, two working together maximizes profits. This is true even though the profits will be divided because they are able to produce more in less time and accomplish greater tasks. But maximizing profit does not exhaust the **good return** Solomon speaks of. Fourth, two working together is good for both working together. When you help someone else with a task it is beneficial for you and for them. When you help someone else there is a positive benefit for you, knowing that you served another, the very thing humans are supposed to do for others. At the same time there is appreciation from the one who received your help. So working together is good for both parties. Lastly, two working together makes close friendships. I cannot emphasize enough that when you accomplish something together with another human, it builds a bond. This is one of the main reasons that when God gave Eve to Adam, it was for the purpose that together they would cultivate and keep the garden. By doing it together they would not only spread the garden kingdom around the world, but they would grow closer together by working together. So if you are a loner and you don't have any or many friends, one of the things you can do to build friendships is do things with other people, work on projects together, accomplish something together. That can be employed in marriages. Some marriages are hanging by a thread because they never accomplish anything together. They don't have joint projects. They don't help one another in the other's projects. And because of that, many opportunities for appreciation are lost and the emotional benefits of helping another are lost and much time is wasted. If we would only learn to work together, we would get so much more done and we would be so much closer. Therefore, verse 9, **two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor.** It is simply maximizing one's efforts. This is just basic human view point wisdom. When you put God in it, it's even better!

In 4:10 Solomon contemplates further value of two working together. **For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up.** He's mainly talking about travel in the following verses. The value of traveling together, which was common for business. In Israel the roads and paths were not paved or even leveled. There were loose stones in paths that crossed fields and it was not uncommon for people to stumble and fall, breaking a bone or falling into a hidden pit. If you have a friend to **lift you up**, that is a wonderful thing. If you don't you are stranded and left desolate. There was no 911, no ambulances, no air evac. You're just stuck there until someone comes along and picks you up. And hopefully you are not a Samaritan in the time of Christ because the Pharisees wouldn't pick you up. They'd leave you for dead just so they didn't become ceremonially unclean! So two is better than one because if you fall someone can lift you up and get you to a doctor. But this might also apply to spiritual falls. Believers can stumble into sin and need help getting out. Gal 6:1-2 describes a believer who is tripped up and stumbles into sin. It's not purposeful, it's accidental. I've stumbled into some of those. How wonderful it is to have a Christian friend who can come alongside of you and help you get back on your feet. Help you out of that mess. Whereas, if you don't, you get spiritually enslaved to that sin pattern. You have no one to help you out of it because you think you are so spiritually strong that you could never fall into it. You are a spiritual lone ranger. And we have these kinds of Christians all over the country. They don't go to church anymore. They don't have any support system. No Christian friends to truly confide in. No one they can get help from if they fall spiritually. It's just them all by their lonesome. That's a bad position to be in.

In 4:11 Solomon gives further benefits of two over one. **Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone?** As one traveled in Israel he often did not make it to the next town to find shelter. They didn't have hotels and motels along the roads and paths. They didn't even have tents, as that was just more baggage to carry. They would just have to lie down in a field and try to stay warm through the night. That's not very fun if you're alone. On a cold night you could freeze. So it was a wonderful thing if you had a companion to **lie down** with to **keep warm**. This is not your husband or wife, although that would apply, but a friend, and it was acceptable for two men or two women to lie close to one another in order to stay warm. So two is better than one when it comes to keeping **warm**.

Now in 4:12 there are even more benefits of two over one. **And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.** Again, this is related to travel. The roads in the ancient world were dangerous. When Ezra set out with the Jews who were returning to the land with all their little ones and possessions, he didn't want to request the king's troops, so they prayed to God for protection from the enemy along the way. Robbers and criminals littered the highways. They were looking for easy targets. The easiest target was a lone traveler. A lone traveler could be easily **overpowered**. However, **two** could **resist** a criminal. The advantage of two over one is confirmed once more.

Then Solomon cites a proverb concerning three strands to show the added benefit of numbers in such a case. **A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.** In this case, if two is better than one, then three is even better. Just as a **cord** composed of **three strands** is difficult to tear apart so three in a group is difficult for a criminal to overpower. Let's just say by application that having one or two true friends in life makes for a strong cord. You don't need 500. This is not having 5,000 friends on Facebook, 99% of which you don't really know. In fact, studies have shown that a person cannot have more than about 3-5 close friends. Our brains simply aren't wired to be able to go much beyond that. Sometimes people complain to me that this church is clique or no one is friendly. But, one has to realize that you can have a lot of acquaintances, but you can really only have a few close friends. Look at who you call the most, and you will see that it is three or four people. Those are the only people you are close friends with. Trying to go beyond that is not making you closer to more people. The research is in and the explosion of social media is not making people closer but farther apart, because the time they are taking to play on social media is taking attention away from the two or three friends who are truly closest. If you are like me, and you have wisdom, you will accept that two or three friends are enough and the cord you form together will be a cord that is difficult to break.

Briefly, this section teaches us that we need one another because "two are better than one." It's not good to be a die-hard independent. There are some advantages to being independent, but as we get older we realize that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages, and the real advantages are held by those who have formed close companionship with a few. But the greatest advantage is held by those who have close companionship with a few believers who are walking with the Lord!

In 4:13 Solomon passes on to a political aphorism, which is a short, terse truth or maxim or principle that leads into a story that shows the instability of political power and the fickleness of popularity. The aphorism is this: one's beginnings do not guarantee success and once success is gained, it does not guarantee continued success. We live in a fickle world with fickle people. Solomon says, **A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction.** Solomon purports the superiority of a **poor yet wise lad** over **an old and foolish king**. We can assume that the **old king** was once wise because he **no longer knew how to receive instruction**. But he is no longer **wise** but **foolish**, because he **no longer knew how to receive instruction**. We're not told what happened to the king, but his downfall may have come by surrounding himself with advisors who constantly flattered him. Over time he became wise in his own eyes, so wise that he no longer knew **how to receive instruction**. Even repeated warnings by his advisors had no effect on him. He already knew the best course. Let this be a warning to all of us. If you are at this point you can become no wiser. You are no wiser than a foolish old king.

Now, as a consequence, the king declined in popularity with the people. He had once been popular for sure. He listened to their concerns and considered the counsel of his advisors. But now he had grown old and foolish. He would not listen to the people. They had needs and concerns, but he would only do what he thought was best.

He was **foolish**. The people he was to serve were just a bother to him. Then came along a **poor lad**, he saw the people's plight and he was **wise**.

4:14 shows how the lad was superior to the king. **For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom.** The **lad** had been in **prison** for some time. We don't know why he was imprisoned. He may have been wrongly accused, like Joseph, or it may have been legitimate. But in any case, he was **born poor in the kingdom**, he had no privileged upbringing and ended up in **prison**. But when he was released from prison it was as if he was born to **become king**. He understood the people, he could identify with them, he understood their plight, he understood their oppression and he knew what to do about it.

So verse 15 describes the people's response, how they thronged to him. **I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him.** Perhaps millions of people **thronged** to him. They **thronged** to him because he understood them. They knew that he had come from where they were, in the dumps, poor and in despair. So he became very popular. In their eyes he had wisdom, and he did. Obviously one lesson we can learn here is that one's humble beginnings do not destine him for failure. His beginnings were humble and his achievements were great. At the same time, one's proud beginnings do not destine one for success. The old and foolish king began rich and powerful but ended up failing.

It was due to a different self-image and a different response to people. Wiersbe said, "Consider now what this story says. The young man was born poor, but he became rich. The old king was rich but it didn't make him any wiser, so he might just as well have been poor. The young man was in prison, but he got out and took the throne. The old king was imprisoned in his stupidity (and within his circle of sycophants) and lost his throne. So far, the moral of the story is: Wealth and position are no guarantee of success, and poverty and seeming failure are no barriers to achievement. The key is wisdom."²

But that is not the end of the story. Just because you get wisdom does not mean that everyone will perceive you as wise forever. In 4:16, **There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him, for this too is vanity and striving after wind.** There is no end to the coming of more people, a generation comes and a generation goes, there are always more who are coming. And so while one generation thought the lad to be so wise and thronged to him, the next generation was **not happy with him**. He became vastly popular with one generation and lost it all with the next. What at first looked like a great story of rising from despair to greatness ended in despair. And anyone who has risen to any high station in life knows this story all too well. One day you are loved and the people throng to you and this may continue for some time, but eventually they turn against you. Solomon concluded, **this too is vanity and striving after the wind.** The story illustrates that there is no ultimate meaning, no ultimate purpose, no ultimate significance. It's all just vanity (when viewed from the standpoint of under the sun).

The lesson of this section is about success. No matter your beginnings in life, you can rise to great popularity or sink in unpopularity. People are fickle and one day you can do no wrong and another day you are on their hit list. You shouldn't worry about your popularity with men, worry about what God thinks about you. Turn to Acts 23:1. This is Paul before the Sanhedrin, giving his defense. He says in verse 1, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day." Friend, that is the only way you can live. You cannot worry about what people think. You can only live with a perfectly good conscience before God. He is the real audience of your life anyway. And if you live like that then your popularity with people will not be that important. But most of us are constantly trying to please men, constantly trying to impress people, trying to have the right house or be the funniest guy or have the right look or the right car or the right job. And all for what? So people will think highly of you. So people will be impressed with you. That stuff doesn't matter. What matters is that God is impressed with you, and that's a matter of how you live before Him. That's a matter of serving others.

This chapter leaves us several things to think about. First, 4:4-8 teaches us about our labor. Are you working your fingers to the bone without thought of anything except building a big bank account? What good is that? Especially when you never enjoy any of it yourself and you don't even think about what you're going to do with it when you die. Who are you going to give it all to? What are they like? And is that a good idea? Or are you just the opposite; idle, lazy and falling into poverty because you just want to have fun? Neither of those are ways to live. The only way to live is to balance labor with enjoyment of the fruits of labor. Second, 4:9-12 teaches us the benefits of friendship. Are you so die-hard independent that you have to do everything yourself? Having a pair of helping hands not only helps you be more productive, it helps you accomplish things you could never do yourself and it forms a close bond of friendship that will help you in a number of circumstances. Are you investing in those few others to build strong friendships? Third, 4:13-16 teaches us about real success. There are people who start with great privilege and sink into failure and there are those who have humble beginnings but rise to great success, but later fall into obscurity. The bottom line is success shouldn't be measured by what people think. It should be measured by what God thinks. Are you living your life to please God or others? The only way to be successful is to live to please Him.

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied, "Be" Commentary Series* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 58.

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied, "Be" Commentary Series* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 60.