

Ecclesiastes 4 • The Unfairness of Life

Introduction

It is interesting to consider the inaccuracy of the common lament, “Life is so unfair”. It is a misnomer to attribute one’s ills to a distant 3rd party we call “life” as if it were some outside agency working its voodoo on us. As spelled out here, the fact is that the unfairness in the course of life comes at the hands of others. It is the direct result of how **people** treat **people** in the various arenas of life. Four representative aspects of this are presented by the Preacher in order to capture the entire spectrum, which obviously contains many more gradations from one end of the scale to the other. But we seem to forget that the fallen nature of the world came about as the result of the fallen nature of man in the first place, and is therefore sustained by fallen man in every subsequent fallen generation.

¹Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done under the sun. And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort them; and on the side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them. ²So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. ³But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed, who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.

[Read v.1-3]

Q: What is the first scenario being addressed? How is this characterized?

A: Man’s oppression of man. In v.3 it is plainly revealed for what it is: “evil activity”.

Q: What is the difference highlighted between the two?

A: The “oppressed” are characterized by “tears”, the “oppressors” by “power”.

Q: What is presented as the ultimate irony for both parties?

A: “...the oppressed...had no one to comfort them...the oppressors...had no one to comfort them”. (v.1) They actually experience the same malady.

Q: What does it mean to “comfort” someone from a biblical perspective?

A: Biblically, “comfort” describes actively assisting someone in need, an act of personal commitment to address their whole situation. It is not simply emotional reassurance, but addressing any physical or material needs and even extending to the spiritual.

Q: We can easily understand why the “oppressed” need personal assistance, but why would the “oppressor” need it?

A: The greater assistance which both parties needs is actually spiritual assistance. In the case of the oppressor, it is someone to address whatever core issue is actually causing them to behave in this manner. Without such “comfort”—that is, spiritual intervention, they will continue in their condition because their behavior will never change.

Q: So what is the proposed solution to ending this condition?

A: None is offered.

Point: This is why the dramatic language that it would be better to have never been born so as to never witness this reality of the human condition; the fallen world is never going to be an oppression-free zone.

Application: In a fallen world governed by sin, there is always going to be those who are oppressors and those who are oppressed. Power used to promote self comes at the expense of others.

⁴I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind. ⁵The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. ⁶One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.

[Read v.4-6]

Q: Is this strictly addressing the issue of riches or monetary gain?

A: The key phrase presented is, “*the result of rivalry*”—that is, seeking to be the very best at one’s profession or the leader in one’s field.

Q: What is the first extreme addressed in v.5?

A: It is the sure result of poverty to come from not just laziness, but someone who chooses not to pursue even the minimum requirements of getting by.

Q: To what extreme is this juxtaposed in v.6?

A: “*One hand full of rest*” is describing being satisfied with attaining the few things necessary, as opposed to “*two fists full of labor*” describing becoming consumed in the quest for an excess of things.

Q: What is the core issue being specifically addressed in this pursuit of things?

A: It is the competition or “*result of rivalry*” wherein the goal is to be better than all the rest. This is ultimately describing a pursuit at the expense of others or solely for being esteemed in the sight of others.

Application: *Promotion of self, even in the workplace or in pursuit of professional standing, when it comes at the expense of others, is just as fruitless in the end as suffering the consequences of doing nothing at all.*

⁷Then I looked again at vanity under the sun. ⁸There was a certain man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches and he never asked, “And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?” This too is vanity and it is a grievous task.

[Read v.7-8]

Q: What is the specific pursuit being addressed?

A: The pursuit of wealth for wealth’s sake.

Q: Why is the issue of having no heir particularly important to this specific situation?

A: There is no pretense of any consideration of others; it is an endeavor devoted entirely to one’s self alone.

Application: *Even when others are completely taken out of the equation, there is no ultimate success for working for ourselves alone.*

Point: *In the above three scenarios are provided examples of the promotion of self over others through the misuse of power, the misuse of career or expertise, and the complete focus on self alone.*

⁹Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. ¹⁰For 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. ¹¹Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? ¹²And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.

[Read v.9-12]

Q: How is this providing a sort of rebuttal or answer to the three previous examples?

A: Whereas in each of the previous examples an abuse of others is variously expressed, here is presented the benefits of personal relationships.

Q: What are the suggested benefits?

1. Two can work better than one so as to return an ever larger profit than just one alone. (v.9)
2. They can render assistance in times of need—that is, they can provide the biblical “*comfort*” previously addressed. (v.10)
3. They can provide mutual support and comfort. (v.11)
4. They can provide mutual protection. (v.12)

Q: How does the ending of v.12 provide the “icing on the cake”, so to speak, for this issue of personal issue of relationships?

A: The examples provided the tangible benefits of just a pair working together, “a cord of **three** strands” is a dramatic way of stating the even greater power of multiple relationships beyond just a pair.

Application: *The right treatment and relationships with others go a long way toward dealing with the previous issues of unfairness in life. It is not a solution to make them go away, but rather of being able to deal with them when they arise.*

¹³A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction. ¹⁴For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. ¹⁵I have seen all the living under the sun throught to the side of the second lad who replaces him. ¹⁶There 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.

[Read v.13-16]

Q: What is the fourth situation being addressed?

A: The instability of politics.

Q: What is the dual shortfall presented here?

A: The motivation behind political ambition, fame, and the response of the masses is at most only temporary and inevitably returns to the worldly state of dissatisfaction.

Q: How would you characterize the difference between the “poor yet wise lad” and the “old and foolish king”?

A: Whereas the king is entrenched and intractable in not being able to “receive instruction”, the opposite is implied in the lad having the ability to be aware of such as he climbs the political ladder, so to speak.

Q: But does one or the other ultimately result in a guaranteed success?

A: No, there seems to be an endless cycle of rising, falling, replacement, repeat.

Q: What is the irony this seems to present?

A: Even though conventional wisdom might offer otherwise, neither age nor might are guarantors of success.

Q: What seems to be the common problem which fuels this cycle of futility?

A: The native dissatisfaction of the people.

Q: How does this last situation fit with the three opening scenarios?

A: Personal relationships cannot be established between a government and the governed as a portion of the population will always be disaffected from the rest even under ideal policies and governance.

Application: *The problems brought upon the population of a fallen world can never be addressed through any man-imposed, political solution.*

Overall Application

Q: While the author of Ecclesiastes does not specifically articulate it as such, what is the common problem implied in each of these four scenarios?

A: Man continually attempts to effect solutions on his own, be they...

- The exercise of personal power. (v.1-3)
- The pursuit of personal expertise. (v.4-6)
- The pursuit of self alone. (v.7-8)
- The pursuit of political unity. (v.13-16)

Point: *The common denominator in each case is the elevation of self over and above everything and everyone else. The unfairness of life is variously rooted in the pursuit of self. This in itself is a testimony that something greater than man is necessary to achieve the ideals he is aware of but incapable of attaining.*

- *How do you relate to the oppressor and the oppressed? How well have you/do you handle power or authority over others? How would they testify to what they have experienced at your hands?*
- *Do you see the pursuit of your profession as being something separate from the rest of your life? How well would your co-workers/employees/employer testify to what they see in you in the workplace?*
- *Is there any “collateral damage” to any of your personal pursuits? Are there any where you’re attempting to remove all others from the equation?*
- *On whom or what are you ultimately relying for justice in life? Is it possible that at times you have sought a political remedy from a spiritual malady?*