

January 22, 2017

## “Two Are Better than One”

### Focal Passage: Ecclesiastes 4:1-16 (NASB)

**Cross References:** Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 23:12; Psalm 4:8; 127:2; Proverbs 12:1; 13:8; 17:10; 27:17; Mark 2:27; 6:31-32; Philippians 1:21-26; Galatians 6:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 10:23-25; 1 Peter 4:8-10; 5:5

**Lesson Idea:** We need to walk with others in our lives, because two are better than one.

### BIBLE IN A YEAR READING PLAN

|                      |                      |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| Jan 15 Genesis 43-45 | Jan 16 Genesis 46-47 |
| Jan 17 Genesis 48-50 | Jan 18 Exodus 1-3    |
| Jan 19 Exodus 4-6    | Jan 20 Exodus 7-9    |
| Jan 21 Exodus 10-12  | Jan 22 Exodus 13-15  |

**Background:** Solomon continued his exploration of the activities of men under the sun. He especially found being alone empty. He concluded that having others in our lives is better.

### Ecclesiastes 1:1-18

*1 Then 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. 2 So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living who are still living. 3 But 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.*

*4 I 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. 5 The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. 6 One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.*

*7 Then I looked again at vanity under the sun. 8 There 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.*

*9 Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. 10 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. 11 Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? 12 And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart. 13 A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction. 14 For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. 15 I have seen all the living under the sun throned to the side of the second lad who replaces him. 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.*

### DISCUSSION:

- v 1. What do the oppressed and their oppressors have in common? Where do you see oppression in the world around you today? How does this verse change how you view those situations?
- v 2-3. Why did he “congratulate the dead?” Why did he think “the one who has never existed” is better off than the living and the dead? How does his attitude about life and death contrast with Paul’s in Philippians 1:21-26? Why?
- v 4. What did Solomon feel was the root of every labor and skill that men have? Is this true today? Why or why not?
- v 5. The NIV translates verse 5 as: *Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves*. How is this true even today?
- v 6. How is rest a gift from God? (see Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 23:12; Psalm 4:8; 127:2; Mark 2:27; 6:31-32)

**NOTE:** from David Guzik:

**For all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor:** The Preacher thought of those who gain success through toil and skillful work – and how it simply brought envy and sometimes hatred from others. This common jealousy of success made life seem like vanity and grasping for the wind.

**The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh:** Solomon here answered the tendency for those jealous of the success of others to be lazy. Like fools, they fold their hands and do nothing – and so waste away. Yet it wasn’t the success of their neighbor that

made them waste away; the foolish, lazy man consumes his own flesh.

**Consumes his own flesh:** “This expression is really equivalent to ‘destroys himself,’ ‘brings ruin upon himself.’” (Deane) A similar thought from a different perspective is found in Psalms 27:2.

**Better a handful with quietness than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind:** The Preacher reflects on the value of *contentment*. It is better to have less and be content (with quietness) than to have more and constantly be grasping for more on top.

Solomon weaved some fascinating themes together.

- Hard work and success are good and not to be envied.
  - Laziness is wrong and destructive.
  - Yet even the one with full hands must learn contentment.
- v 7-8. What was another vain situation that Solomon noticed in life? How can life be empty for a workaholic?

**NOTE:** from Guzik:

**There is one alone, without companions:** Solomon thought of a man alone, without family or close friends.

**Yet there is no end to all his labors, nor is his eye satisfied with riches:** The man in Solomon’s thinking works hard and wants to gain more and more.

**But he never asks, “For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?”** The Preacher thought this unexamined life of hard work and success – without family and friends to share in it all – is vanity and a grave misfortune.

The Preacher was entirely correct from an *under the sun* perspective. Under that premise, there is no such thing as an eternal accomplishment and one does not even have the potential satisfaction of passing one’s accomplishments on to another.

- v 9-11. In what ways are two better than one? (see also Proverbs 27:17; Galatians 6:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 10:23-25; 1 Peter 4:8-10)

**NOTE:** from Guzik:

These four verses show us the great value of human relationships, that two are better than one. Living and working together is a great advantage to living and working alone, and adds these four things to life:

- Productivity (they have a good reward for their labor)
- Help in need (If they fall, one will lift up his companion)
- Comfort in life (they will keep warm)
- Safety and security (two can withstand)

- v 12. What does it mean that “a cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart?” How is this a good metaphor for marriage? Why should marriage be a “cord of three strands?”

**NOTE:** from Guzik:

**A threefold cord is not quickly broken:** The Preacher gives a fascinating final line to this section dealing with the goodness of companionship. We might have expected that he would praise the strength of a twofold cord; instead he noted that a threefold is not quickly broken. It is commonly understood that the third cord is God Himself, and that a relationship intertwined with God is a threefold cord that is not quickly broken.

- v 13-15. Why is a wise child better than a leader who won’t listen anymore? Why should we always remain teachable? (see Proverbs 12:1; 13:8; 17:10; 1 Peter 5:5)
- v 15-16. How do people treat leaders? Why are they so quickly forgotten? How do they bring unhappiness to the leaders who come after them?

**NOTE:** from Guzik:

**Yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him:** As Solomon thought of this young man who achieved much and became famous, he understood that the fame would be short-lived. Even if it lasted his entire lifetime (which would be rare and remarkable), it would not live on much beyond his own life. With his *under the sun* premise, this thought brought the familiar conclusion to the Preacher: Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind.

**APPLICATION:**

- ✓ Who has God brought to your life to help you be better than one? Who needs your help?
- ✓ How are you remaining teachable to the Lord?