

01-07-15b Ecclesiastes

Let's resume our study now in Ecclesiastes chapter 4, keeping in mind the line of thought and the argument of this book that we reviewed in our first lesson this morning. Solomon begins, and in the New King James, actually I guess this is the New American Standard. Where's my New King James? In the New King James, Ecclesiastes chapter 4 begins, Then I returned, and I considered all the oppression that is done under the sun.

And look, the tears of the oppressed, but they have no comforter. On the side of their oppressors there is power, but they have no comforter. Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead more than the living who are still alive.

Yet better than both is he who has never existed, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun. Again I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind.

The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh. Better a handful with quietness than both hands full together with toil and grasping for the wind. Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun.

There is one alone without companion. He has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labors, nor is his eye satisfied with riches.

But he never asks, For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good? This also is vanity and a grave misfortune. Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion.

But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Again if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one be warm alone? Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him, and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

He goes forward there in the chapter, but the section that's under our gaze this morning is the first few verses where he says, Then I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun. Well, returned from what? If you look back at the last portion of chapter 3, I have seen that there is nothing good in a man being happy in his labor because that is his reward. Who will bring him to see what will occur after him? So Solomon is looking and saying, This man may be happy now, but how can he get a view of what's going to happen afterward? Solomon is looking past the setting of the sun.

He's looking at the judgment. He's looking at eternity. Now he's going to return.

He's going to turn his attention back under the sun and make some more observations. And this is an interesting pattern in Ecclesiastes where Solomon uses the phrase, I have seen, and he

also uses the phrase, there is nothing good. And I went back and sort of collected these together because there's a thread that runs through these every time they're used.

For example, if you go back to chapter 2 and verse 24, Solomon said there is nothing better for a man, if you use the standard translation, than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. And you remember our translation of that, that there is nothing good for a man to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. Solomon says that's *ein tov*, that's not good.

But that verse concludes by saying, this also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God. This unsatisfactory answer that's been talked about ever since chapter 1, God designed it this way. God built the universe, built the world, built life under the sun this way that you can have a momentary gratification, but the long term is not good.

We see this all through life. You know, you try to tell teenagers this, don't go have sexual relations with somebody you're dating. It seems fun in the short term and you swear you're in love and you're going to be soul mates for time and eternity, but it's a short term view.

You don't see as a teenager the long road of life and the fact that the things that you think are so neat and groovy in somebody right now, it tells you how old I am when I use the word groovy, but the things that people see that they think are really fantastic and to die for in somebody at the age of 15 or 16 is not going to be what they value and treasure and love five or ten years down the road. It's a short term view and you probably have seen and possibly experienced that tremendous infatuation and rosy glow that you get when you're in that state of being completely absorbed by another person, but it makes you worthless for a lot of other things and you look back from a standpoint of greater maturity and realize that that was fine then, but you wouldn't want to be feeling that way all the time. You wouldn't want to be stuck in that state because you can't get on with your life.

Well, Solomon is sort of making that same point that you can busy yourself with a lot of things in this life, but if all you do is eat and drink and tell yourself that your labor is good, and this literally says to see good in your soul, in your labor, you say, I've really got a lot of gratification out of this. This is from God, and juxtaposed with this gratification in living life under the sun is this knowledge of eternity. That's what Solomon told us in the last chapter.

God has put *olam* in man's heart, and we are forced to confront the fact that this is really just hell when you really sit down and look at it. Teenagers, if they live long enough, do come to realize that infatuation is not the same as long-term love, and this complete inability to think about anybody but this other 16-year-old is not really... I mean, it seems great at the time, but you look back on it with perspective and realize that, well, yeah, I mean, that's fun. But there are people that never figure this out, and when they hit their midlife crisis, they say, you know, I want to go back to the days where I just got all achy and distracted.

People in the time of Shakespeare and John Donne and all that, when they were thinking that

there were humors and melancholy and stuff in your innards that made you feel the way you feel, talked about the melancholia that would overcome a young man when he falls in love and how all he does is pine and lean against the tree, gazing in the sky and aching to be with the object of his affection and all this, and how he was just kind of a worthless, doting fool because all he could think about is this curly-haired damsel up on the second-story balcony. And Solomon is making the same sort of point. You've got to get past just eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow we die, and there's something beyond that.

So every time up to this point, and you can write these references down, Ecclesiastes 2.24, nothing good for a man to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good or to see good in his soul from his labor. Chapter 3, verses 9 and 10, what profit is there to the worker from that in which he toils? I have seen the answer which God has given the sons of men with which to be answered. So Solomon says in 2.24, I have seen that this temporary infatuation with life is not good.

3.9 and 10, I have seen this answer that God has given the sons of men to be answered with. He's given them the ability to have momentary gratification, but he's also put eternity in their hearts. It raises a question.

It creates responsibility for a choice. Chapter 3, verse 16, Furthermore, I have seen under the sun, in the place of justice there's wickedness, in the place of righteousness there's wickedness. I have seen this, Solomon says.

Things are not as they should be under the sun. Chapter 3, verse 22, I have seen that there is nothing good for man to rejoice in his doings because this itself is his reward. That's all he gets from it.

There's no lasting benefit. It's heavil. Who will bring him to see what will be after him? And he's going to come up here in chapter 4, I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor.

We'll investigate that more fully when we get to verse 4. But this is a recurring theme. And so far, every time we've seen Solomon looking at something, it's this idea that man is taking pleasure in this life without thinking about the future. Same thing with the phrase, there is nothing good.

Same verse, 2.24, there is nothing good in just eating and drinking and literally seeing his spirit to be good in his labor. Ruach. I've seen this from the hand of God.

Chapter 3, verse 12, I know that there is nothing good in them, in man, if he's rejoicing or doing good in his life. Every man who eats and drinks and sees good in all his labor, it is a thing given by God. 3.12 essentially restates 2.24, the same idea.

Chapter 3, verse 22, I have seen that there is nothing good for man rejoicing in his doings

because this itself is his portion. Every time Solomon looks, what he sees is not good. When he looks at this life, this is what has inspired the statements about Hevel and chasing the wind.

And we're going to see this Ein Tov phrase used one more time in Ecclesiastes, way down in chapter 8. I was remarking earlier, I was debating whether or not I should jump forward to chapter 8 because this is one of the wrap-up statements toward the end of the book that summarizes the argument that Solomon is making from his observations. But I want to go forward to chapter 8 and verse 15 because by the time we get there, you will have forgotten that we covered it here maybe. But it's very important because it follows this same theme.

Ecclesiastes 8, 15. What's he talking about here? You go back a little bit in the context. You can go up to verse 10.

I have seen the wicked buried. Those who used to go in and out from the holy place, they're soon forgotten in the city where they did thus. This too is Hevel.

Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil. Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and lengthens his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly, it says in the New American Standard. But it will not be well, it will not be Tov, for the evil man, he will not lengthen his days like a shadow because he does not fear God.

There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. When you look around under the sun, it seems like the wicked prosper sometimes and the good go empty-handed.

And that, of course, is true. I used to hear teaching about how if you're faithful and take in the Word of God and go to spiritual maturity, then you're going to have five different categories of blessing. You're going to have personal blessing and professional blessing and financial blessing and all these different kinds of prosperity.

And I looked around and I didn't have all of those. And I thought, well, how long does it take? And what you find is that you don't always rise to the top of any organization that you're in. You don't always excel beyond everybody else in your vicinity just because you're a faithful believer.

That is not what the Word of God teaches. Sometimes it happens to the righteous according to the deeds of the wicked. There is crime in the place of justice.

There's crime where there ought to be righteousness, Solomon says. He says, you know, we've had all this stuff in the law where if you do well, you will live long in the land which the Lord your God gives you, a land flowing with milk and honey, every man with his vine and his fig tree, and everything's going to be great if you just follow the law. And Solomon says, you know, when I look

around, I don't see this always happening.

So then in verse 15, if you read this, the New American Standard says, So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, as this will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life, which God has given him under the sun. Since life is unfair anyway, then you might as well just grab pleasure where you can find it, because, you know, eat, drink and be merry. Is that what this book is teaching? We're getting down to chapter 8. This is toward the end of the book, after he's made all these observations.

And Solomon is saying, let's give a toast to pleasure, eat, drink and be merry, because, you know, it's not always going to turn out great. So if you can eat and drink and be merry, well, good for you. It's a sad thing, because that is not what this verse says in the original.

But because this is another case of what I was talking about earlier, people decide what the book is about, and then they make the translation fit. Well, and I want to go ahead and straighten this out, because this is the one other place where you have Ein Tov. There is nothing better for a man but to eat, drink and be merry, because this will stand by him in his toils.

Let me ask you something. Is this true in life? Is this even a true statement from a human point of view? When you go out and party on a Friday night, and you're with your friends, and you're having a TGI Friday's moment there, and everybody is hail fellow, well met, and toasting with frothy beers and things, and then a week or two later you lose your job, and your car breaks, and you get sick, and everybody leaves you, and you get falsely accused, and everything is going rotten, and you say, boy, you know, my life really stinks, but man, that was a great Friday night. Boy, weren't we having... That stuff doesn't stick with you in your toils and in your labor.

You don't think back to happy hour, and oh boy, that trip to Disneyland we took two years ago. Ah, let me take some comfort in that. And boy, I remember that good birthday present I got six years ago last December.

Man, that was a happy time. That doesn't stick with you. If there's anything that's true in life, past pleasures did not sustain you in present crisis.

That's not even true from a secular point of view. And what are you going to do, just daydream and try to transport yourself into a happy past and not cope with your troubles? I mean, that's a dumb thing to say, scriptural or not. Certainly not in the inspired Word of God.

So how could this possibly say... How could Solomon... And this is why people say, well, see, he was out of fellowship. He was just being dumb here, and it got into the inspired... Well, where do you see... I mean, are you going to go up above and say he was out of fellowship when he said a sinner does evil, or there's futility done on earth, the righteous get the wicked's reward, and the wicked get the righteous reward? Where did he quit being in fellowship and get out of fellowship

to commend pleasure? If that were the case, there would be a marker in the text. We have the words of pagans and evil people in the Word of God, but you can tell because the text tells you.

This is a shift from the good stuff I was telling you up above. Well, there's no marker in this text to tell you that he walked out of the room, committed a sin, came back, and kept writing, and now is out of fellowship. Well, let me commend pleasure.

Eat, drink, and be merry. Well, we need to go back to the Hebrew here and see what this actually says. The word here that is translated commend is the word shabach, S-H-A-B-A-C-H.

And that is the word that begins verse 15 of chapter 8, and it's ve-shabachti. The T part is the first person Solomon is talking but he emphasizes himself because he puts the personal pronoun after it. The T part, shabachti, that says, I do whatever the action of the verb is.

It's the first person singular. So he says shabachti. But then he adds the pronoun ani.

And any time you add the pronoun, this is great emphasis because the fact that I am saying this is already built into the verb. And most of the time, you don't need the word I in there. So when they add it, it means I myself.

I myself am doing this action of the verb. And it lends great emphasis to the fact that, yeah, me, I myself am doing this. So Solomon says, I myself did this shabach action.

Well, what does shabach mean? It's translated a couple of different ways in the Old Testament. It is sometimes translated laud or praise. You find this in the Psalms.

You go, for example, to Psalm 63, 4, where the psalmist here says, this is David when he was in the wilderness of Judah. It's what the superscription says in Psalm 63. Oh God, you are my God.

Early will I seek you. My soul thirsts for you. My flesh longs for you in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water.

So I have looked for you in the sanctuary to see your power and your glory because your loving kindness is better than life. My lips shall praise you. Thus I will bless you while I live.

I will lift up my hands in your name. Well, where it says, I will bless you while I live, I will lift up my hands in your name, that's shabach, I will bless you. And so they say, well, the verb means to laud or praise or bless God's name in this case.

But it's used relatively rarely. It's also found in Psalm 147, 12, where the psalmist is saying, the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him and those who hope in his mercy. Praise the Lord, oh Jerusalem.

Praise your God, oh Zion. For he has strengthened the bars of your gates. He has blessed your children within you.

He makes peace in your borders and so forth. So actually in Psalm 63, I should have gone on to verse 5. My soul shall be satisfied as with morrow and fatness in my mouth. It shall praise you with joyful lips.

All of this is looking to God and acknowledging his greatness and blessing his name. He says, your loving kindness is better than life. My lips shall praise you.

And shabach is used there. But here's the point. That's the only definition that's given in the lexicon.

And those are the two examples, those two in the Psalms. And they base this on Aramaic. And they say it's a late Aramaism that it means to praise.

And so they use that definition twice in the Psalms. And then the rest of the references are in Ecclesiastes. And Ecclesiastes 4.2 is the example that they give.

And also Ecclesiastes 8.15. So not only do we have the nothing good repeating itself in 8.15, but we also have this laud or praise idea that we're going to see in verse 2. So it's important for us to straighten out shabach because the root meaning, the old meaning that's attested in the Arabic and the Assyrian cognates of shabach doesn't mean to laud or praise. It means to soothe or to still, to calm something, to still it, to make it quit moving. It's used in that old sense in Psalm 89.10, talking about the frothy waves.

Remember the troubled sea that so often represents evil? And the psalmist in Psalm 89 says, talking to God, he says, you still those waves. You calm them. Same thing in Psalm 65, stilling the roar of the seas.

Psalm 65.8 in the Hebrew. Well, this is the old idea of shabach. So what would it mean in our context? And what does it mean in those psalms that are quoted with the late meaning, to praise or to commend? Well, if you look at something and you are impressed by it, you stand still.

You stand still in the presence of something. It just makes you stop in your tracks because it's awesome or because it's impressive. It can be good impressive or bad impressive.

But we have a phrase in English, sort of a slang thing where we say, well, it just makes your jaw drop. You just stand there with your mouth open. And you're still.

You look at it and you just, you can't hardly think of anything to say. It doesn't make you want to go do something. You just stop and stare at it because it impresses you.

And this is really the root idea of this verb as it was used in 1000 B.C., not 300 B.C., as they would have us believe. And you can see where it would be easy to slip into the praise and laud idea from that. And that's how the late Aramaic meaning developed because you stand still in the

presence of something.

Later on, if it has a positive connotation, well, you're impressed by it and you praise it and laud it or something. But the original idea has the idea of just, remember the, oh, how wonderful hymn, I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene. I stand amazed.

I just stand there amazed. Well, let's go back to Ecclesiastes 8.15. This is my translation. I myself stood still at pleasure.

I was impressed. I recognized the power of pleasure. And that would probably be the best translation.

I was impressed with the power of pleasure. He's not commending it. There are perfectly good words for commend or praise.

Remember hallelujah, praise, hillel is to praise, hallel. Solomon is not praising pleasure. He's impressed with its power in the same way that you can look at the works of God and be impressed with its power.

It just makes you stand still. But you can also stand still and respect something that you don't agree with and that you're not commending. I am amazed at the power of the drug cartels to do what they do and the ingenuity with which they smuggle so much cocaine into this country.

I don't commend it, but I am impressed by it. If these guys could put that ingenuity to work in a positive sense, they'd be legitimate millionaires. So Solomon, he's not saying, I commend or I recommend or I suggest to you that you pursue.

He's just saying, it just makes me stand still when I look at pleasure. What does he say here? I am impressed at the power of pleasure. There is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and be merry.

And then it says, and this will stand by him in his toils. Well, we have to take a look at the verb that's translated stand by because the verb doesn't mean to stand by, although you can see how that meaning gets assigned to it. This is the verb luh, L-U-H.

For those of you that are big on Hebrew, it's the Cal imperfect of that or lawa would be another way to say it. But the root meaning of lawa, which is L-A-W-A-H, the root meaning is to be joined. And it was used of, the noun form of it came to be used of a wreath because what do you do when you make a wreath? We've got one hanging on the door right here.

You take these long stems, you weave them together, and you entwine them, and it makes a thing. And we could look at other uses of it. It was describing some of the decoration of things in the tabernacle, talking about the entwined branches that decorated different things.

But to join or join things together, you weave them together like a basket. You twine them like a wreath or a rope. And that is a perfectly good meaning here.

I myself was impressed at the power of pleasure from which there is nothing good for a man under the sun, for whether he eats or drinks or is merry, it will entwine him in his work throughout the days of his life which God has given him under the sun. You talk about people being married to their work, people being occupied with their activities, that momentary pleasure. Why does Solomon say all through the book there's nothing good in this eating and drinking and being merry? He doesn't say there's nothing better.

He says it's not good. Why is it not good? Because you get wrapped up in the work that gives you that momentary pleasure. It's like an addiction where you have to keep going back for your fix.

And this is down toward the end of the book. Solomon is starting to wrap up and draw his conclusions. What is the advance that he makes in 8.15 on these same statements about nothing good in eating and drinking and seeing good in your work? He's said this three or four times now.

What does he add in 8.15 that he didn't say before? He said the reason I just stand, I am impressed at the power of pleasure because what does it do? It entwines people in their work. It joins them to their work. And it's not just work in the sense of employment.

This is what you do. These are your activities, whatever it may be. You could be a stay-at-home housewife or mom or you could be doing whatever.

It's just whatever it is that you do that you get gratification from, that gratification entwines you. It joins you to that work and so you keep going back to it. And it keeps your eyes under the sun.

You don't lift your eyes and look at the eternity that God has planted in your heart. You don't stop and ask yourself the question, why do I have to keep renewing? Why do I have to keep doing more things to get gratification? Where is that permanent peace? Where is the permanent happiness? Where is the long-term, unheavily, if you will, meaning in life? So again, when you look at the context here in chapter 8, he says, you know, it doesn't always happen to the righteous like it should. Sometimes they get the reward of the wicked.

Sometimes the wicked get the reward of the righteous. And even when you find pleasure in the simple things of life, eating and drinking and doing good in your work, that pleasure entwines you in those activities. And that is an impressive power because it balances, it fights against, there is a contention in your soul between the eternal and the temporal, between the things of God and the things of this life.

And we fight that battle every day, don't we? To try to remember, because God has assigned us this life and most of the day is spent in living human life. We don't spend most of the day looking at our Bibles. We don't spend most of the day singing hymns and quoting scripture.

We have to find that dividing line between temporal life and eternal things. And the proportion is always greater for living this earthly life. We have to eat, we have to drink, we have to sustain ourselves, we have to accomplish tasks, and that takes up most of the day.

So how do you keep from becoming entwined in that and not remembering that there is something beyond the sun? Well, this is what Solomon is looking at. If you just get stuck in this life, it's not good. We have to raise our eyes and see beyond this life.

If you look at this life, you'll get frustrated. What do the Jews do today when they look at the Holocaust and so forth? They say, well, how could the loving God let this happen? Look at the injustice, look at the hunger, look at the disease, look at the little children and abuse and all these horrible things that happen. There's no justice.

How can there be a God when there's no justice? And people explain away God and don't look at the eternal because they're just looking at things under the sun. They say, you know, you can't find justice. You just have to do your own little thing here and just make justice where you are.

You can only control your little corner of the world. So in your classroom or in your home or in your workplace, you just have to try to make things right there. But the world is full of injustice.

And so people miss or ignore or explain away the things of God. And they say, well, it's just in this life. That's a temptation that all of us face, even as believers, even as ones who have the Word of God, because the gratification that you get from doing something and saying it's good, the gratification you get from sustaining yourself, I made my own way, I paid my bills, I put the food and drink on my table, that is addictive.

And you can choose that instead of looking at the eternity that God has placed in your heart. And when we seek to draw and find that line between acknowledging God and remembering who we are and why we're here, and yet living most of the day, each day, in the world, accomplishing tasks and meeting goals, making decisions and so forth, what is the key? Well, as we grow and mature, just like in human life, it is why you do what you do. It isn't Bible class every night.

It isn't just starting the day and ending the day in the Scriptures and so forth. We have to keep ourselves aware. This is why I think Daniel's example and David's example is so good.

How many times a day did Daniel pray? Three times a day. The Bible says pray without ceasing, but that's a pattern of life. It doesn't mean never stop praying.

It means it should be habitual, it should be frequent, it should be a regular part of the pattern of life. David had the same thing. Remember the Psalm? Evening and morning and at noon will I pray and cry aloud.

So you start the day orienting yourself to the grace and the plan of God. Stop in the middle of the

day, reset your compass, and then at the end of the day, review and look forward to the next day. Evening and morning and at noon will I pray and cry aloud and he shall hear my voice.

Psalms 55, 17. I know that one because a lady set that to music when I was a little boy. But what do you do in between the morning prayer and the noon prayer and the evening prayer? You've got to live your earthly life.

So we are under the sun. God put us here, but we've got to remember who we are and why we're here. And this is what Solomon is bringing to Israel.

He's saying, look, you've got the law, you've got the definition of righteousness in terms of works, but you've got to look beyond. You've got to think about the God that is evaluating and is going to intensively seek out what you're pursuing. And it is not enough to just pursue the pleasure of the moment.

That pleasure is powerful. Solomon says, it just makes me stand still when I look at it because it entwines man in his work. Well, thorns can entwine the seed that sprouts up in the field.

Remember the parable of the soil and the seed? The thorns and thistles choked out the word, just entwined it so that it couldn't produce its fruit. We can't let ourselves get entwined by even what seems to be good. It's gratifying to get things done and accomplish a list of tasks.

But if I spend all week long, I look at myself. I've got trucks to fix and projects to accomplish and all these different things to get done. If it keeps me from my preparation in the Word, if I think, well, it's really great to get my vehicle fixed and to get this task done and that done and do well in my work and make sure that professionally I'm doing what I'm supposed to and spending long hours down there.

But if it intrudes itself into my spiritual life, if I come home and I'm irritable, if I commit mental attitude sins or sins of the tongue, if I fail in the exercise of my gift in the spiritual world, then I have become entwined. I have let those things overpower what I pursue. I'm starting to pursue accomplishment in the earthly realm at the expense of spiritual things.

Well, Solomon is bringing this message to Israel and God the Holy Spirit is bringing this message to us. We have to watch how we walk. There's a big crowd of people.

And if you've ever been in the mall or you've ever been when a theater lets out or at the airport when a flight comes in and you get caught up in the crowd and everybody's walking the same way, if you're not careful, you can get swept right past where you need to go. Trying to get to the walk over to get to your car and you just get swept right past it to luggage pickup. Well, we're in a crowd of people, all of whom are walking, halak, under the sun.

And we've got to remember who we are and why we're here and be sure that when God looks at us, when we are brought to see what comes after us, God sees good that is beautiful. Well, we'll

resume in Chapter 4 next time and we're going to find out that there is a lot of evil to be seen under the sun. And it would be good if you didn't have to look at it, but we can learn from it.

That's what we'll be looking at as we begin our study next time. But let's close here in a word of prayer. Father, we thank you for your grace in bringing us into this world and saving us and giving us not only freedom from the penalty and the effects of sin, but also in giving us the opportunity to move in a positive direction, to bear fruit, to achieve righteousness by faith.

And we pray that the things we've looked at this morning will stick with us, that God the Holy Spirit will use it in His hand as a sharp sword to expose our thoughts and motivations, to help us see in our blind spots, so that we can more closely conform to the example of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who lived His life according to Your plan and to please You. We pray these things in His name. Amen.