

WHAT MAKES SENSE WHEN LIFE DOESN'T?

A GUIDED TOUR OF THE RAT RACE (AND WHY FRIENDS MIGHT BE ABLE TO HELP YOU.)

Ecclesiastes 4.

Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

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.

The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.

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

Again, I saw vanity under the sun: 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.

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 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! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. 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.

If you live long enough and keep your eyes open wide enough, you will find things about life that don't make sense. You will experience disappointments. There will be things that will frustrate you and sadden you. The book of Ecclesiastes asks the question: what makes sense when life doesn't.

You have probably heard life described as a rat race. It's a terrible picture if you think about it too long, but it's not far from some of the things that the Preacher writes about in chapter 4. We are going to take a look at some of the situations he describes. It will be a bit bleak - at least for a while, but in the middle of chapter 4 there is a theme that adds a bit of hope, and that is what we want to focus on.

So hold on as we look at the Preacher's look at some of the negatives of the rat race and you will be able to go away with an incentive to make a difference.

Abuse and oppression.

Look back at the first 3 verses.

Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

This is part of the Preacher's frustration at what he sees going on in the world. There is oppression and injustice. It's not just an isolated occurrence; it happens again and again. The oppressors have the power; the oppressed have only their tears and there is no one to comfort them.

Our little part of the world has had its troubles. The worst seems thankfully to be in the past. But it is easy for the comfort of our lives to make us indifferent to what goes on in other places where there is oppression and despair. Leaders abuse their power. The people whom they crush can do nothing to stop them and no one seems able to bring comfort.

Think of what it would be to live in a country where there is hyper inflation, and when elections come along there is such intimidation and violence that the results can only go one way. Think of the helplessness of living in that.

It is so bad that the Preacher reckons you'd be better never to have been born, rather than live in a world like this.

Work and achievement.

Verses 4 to 6.

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.

The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.

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

What he is basically saying in verse 4 is that the only reason people work and try to achieve things in life is out of a sense of envy of other people. Other people seem to be ahead of you so you run hard in the rat race to catch up with them. I think he is overstating his case somewhat - there are people who work hard for better motives than this, but he is not making this up.

The Preacher says that envy drives a lot of what we do. On the other hand he finds that we live in a world of extremes. Some people give up on work altogether; they would almost prefer to starve to death. Certainly some peace would be better than the mad futility of jealousy at work.

Lonely isolation.

The fourth picture also has to do with work.

Look at verses 7 and 8.

Again, I saw vanity under the sun: 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 man has no one to share the benefits of his work, but he is never satisfied. Why would he work and put himself through all of this?

Political power.

(I'm leaving verses 9-12 for a moment). Look at verse 13.

Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. 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.

Political power and influence are fragile things. You can lose power by being foolish and refusing to take advice: that is what the old king does. But even the king who comes after him gets forgotten, through no fault of his own. He is popular. But time goes by and he is forgotten.

There you have four scenes from the rat race. You have people being crushed by others who abuse their power. You have workers whose motivation is to stay ahead of their neighbours. You have isolated people who work like mad, never satisfied, but have no one to share the benefits with. You have powerful people who become foolish and lose their place; you have popular rulers who simply get forgotten.

I have deliberately left out the paragraph from verse 9 to verse 12. It is the most positive part of the chapter (that would not be hard!)

Companionship.

Right in the middle of this bleak survey is something to encourage us. It is set against the story of the man working by himself and for himself with no one to share the benefits of his work. As the Preacher thinks about this isolation, he thinks about the value of companionship.

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 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! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

The basic point is that two are better than one. In fact, three are even better: I think that is the point of the reference to a three-fold cord.

Some of you have probably heard wedding sermons based on these verses. I don't think it is intended primarily to be about marriage, but the principle certainly applies to a marriage relationship.

Why are two better than one?

- Because they get a better return from their work.
- Because if one person falls, the other one can pick him up. It's not just a question of tripping over on the street; it is more likely that the person falls over the edge of a cliff, or he slips into a ravine. By himself, there is no way out. His companion picks him up.
- Because if the night is cold, they keep each other warm. It might seem odd to us in our world of hot water bottles and electric blankets, or in a world that has become over-sexualised, but the Preacher sees how two companions can keep each other warm.
- Because if one is attacked, the other can defend him. If you are alone when you are attacked and your attacker is strong, you are in trouble. Two can fend off one attacker.

For all these reasons, two are better than one. Three are even better.

That is the answer to the lonely hard working man in the previous section. But what's interesting is if you now go back over all the other scenes that are described, in one way or another part of what is wrong with each of them is human relationships gone wrong.

- Powerful people misuse their power to abuse the weak.
- The weak have no one to comfort them.
- Workers are not working for a good cause; they are trying to outdo each other in the rat race.
- A man on his own is working without any obvious meaning to what he is doing.
- A popular king is forgotten because popularity is fickle. It does not last.

Set in the middle of all of that is the theme of companionship.

In Ecclesiastes we need to grab the positive whenever it comes along, and here is one of those times. Friendship.

Some of you will recognise the words from the theme tune of the popular TV series, *Friends*.

I'll be there for you (When the rain starts to pour).

I'll be there for you (Like I've been there before).

I'll be there for you ('Cause you're there for me too).

No one could ever know me.

No one could ever see me.

Sometime the only one who knows what its like to be me.

Someone to face the day with, make it through all the mess with.

Someone I'll always laugh with, even under the worst I'm best with you.

It's like you're always stuck in second gear.

When it hasn't been your day, your week, your month, or even your year.

I'll be there for you ...

But companionship did not start there! From its opening pages the Bible promotes the value of relationship. God lives in relationship - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He made people to relate to one another. He gave Eve to Adam. He called a whole nation to belong to himself. He builds the church as a community where people exist in relationship with one another. Both Old and New Testaments have a great deal to say about these relationships function.

You have to wonder then, in Ecclesiastes 4, what difference would companionship make to the rat race?

Maybe some day I will preach a series of sermons on friendship. Meantime, here are two things to think about that you can trace in the passage.

Good friends contribute to each other's well being.

There is a contrast between the companions who have a good return on their effort and the man who is working alone. There is also a contrast with the people who work hard out of envy: they want to get ahead and stay ahead of the people they know.

As I said at the time, I think the Preacher was overstating when he talked about all the toil he saw being the result of envy. But it happens.

I had a friend in Switzerland who worked as a currency trader. He couldn't trust his colleagues. He didn't dare turn his back. It was hard to take time off. Someone was likely to steal your customers and your commission. I doubt that currency traders are the only ones who operate like this!

When friends work together, each of them adds value to what the other does. Perhaps it is a case of $1 + 1 = 3$. Each man does a certain amount of work on his own. If you put them together, you don't just get double the amount but there is even more of a return.

Matthew Henry wrote:

"One man is nobody; nor will poring upon a book in a corner accomplish a man as the reading and studying of men will. Wise and profitable discourse sharpens men's wits; and those that have ever so much knowledge may by conference have something added to them. It sharpens men's looks, and, by cheering the spirits, puts a briskness and liveliness into the countenance, and gives a man such an air as shows he is pleased himself and makes him pleasing to those about him."

They keep each other warm. They pull each other out of holes in the road. They protect each other from when someone wants to do harm

I don't like to over-spiritualise parts of the Bible, especially when I don't think they are meant to be spiritualised. This is literal cold and the two people literally keep each other warm. But I am going to take a risk and suggest that in the same way two people can keep each other warm physically, two people can also keep each other warm spiritually.

You read about it in Hebrews. The writer tells his readers to encourage each other and spur one another on so that their hearts do not grow hard. One of the ways God provides for our spiritual growth is through the ways our lives intersect with other people. There are times when we need others to give us a perspective that we are not capable of ourselves.

Let me read you a story that illustrates this.

As I sat with my family at a local breakfast establishment, I noticed a finely dressed man at an adjacent table. His Armani suit and stiffly pressed shirt co-ordinated perfectly with a power tie. His wing tipped shoes sparkled from a recent shine. Every hair was in place including his perfectly groomed moustache. The man sat alone, eating a bagel as he prepared for a meeting. As he reviewed the papers before him, he appeared nervous, glancing frequently at his Rolex watch. It was obvious he had an important meeting ahead. The man stood up and I watched as he straightened his tie and prepared to leave. Immediately I noticed a blob of cream cheese attached to his finely groomed moustache. He was about to go into the world dressed in his finest, with cream cheese on his face. I thought of the business meeting he was about to attend. Who would tell him? Should I? What if no one did?

We all have cream cheese that we don't see. There are things about us that threaten our spiritual health.

Two years ago I was going through a difficult experience where I felt that some people in our church in Switzerland had treated me unfairly. I deeply upset at what had happened and if I had examined myself closely I would probably have felt that much of my anger was justified. I had a friend in the church called Tom. Tom did a brave thing. He phoned me in the middle of the whole business and challenged me about bitterness. He was absolutely right.

Bitterness is just one thing, but it is such a dangerous thing. It poisons our hearts and makes them hard.

If you want to call that Tom trying to keep my heart warm when it was getting cold, or if you want to call it Tom seeking to pull me up when I had fallen, either way, this was a friend who wanted to contribute to my well-being.

Do you have friends like that? Do you have friends who will stand by you when you fall? Or will they all run at the first sign of trouble? Do you have friends who will care enough for you that they will pull you back to your feet to get you back on your journey? Do you have friends who will do

that even if it means having the courage to challenge you about something in your life that should not be there? Are you willing to let them do this?

It is very easy to settle for superficial friendships where meaningful conversations don't happen. Have you got friends who contribute to your well being?

But just as important, are you that kind of friend to anyone?

Good friends are loyal.

I'm thinking of the young, popular king who is no sooner gone than he is forgotten. Did he have any friendships that were as strong as a three-fold cord and would not be easily broken?

There is a warning here that some relationships are fickle. Beware of popularity. It is not guaranteed to last.

Last week a London psychiatrist spoke about the way our society shapes the ideas of relationship among people born after 1990. It's the Facebook and MySpace generation. I am not a member of the Facebook generation, but I have a Facebook account and it tells me that I have 138 friends (and there are some pending!) I think Facebook can be quite useful, but I am prepared to listen to the wisdom of Dr Tyagi, the psychiatrist. He suggests that websites like Facebook and others - social networking - have distorted the idea of friendship.

On Facebook it might only take a few minutes to add several friends to your life. And you can remove those same friends from your life even more easily than you add them. It's an interesting theory. And it is certainly a whole new concept that you can cultivate friendships without ever having a conversation or even being in the same room as a person. I know that previous generations wrote letters, but there tends to be more thought in a letter than in an instant message.

The argument goes that if these are the kinds of relationships many people have, there could be a knock-on effect in their real life relationships.

Can I ask you again, do you have friends who are loyal? And more importantly, are you a loyal friend?

There is a story told about two friends who had grown up as best friends. Their names were Jim and Peter.

Though Jim was just a little older than Phillip and often assumed the role of leader, they did everything together. They even went to high school and college together.

After being in college together, they decided to join the marines. By a unique series of circumstances they were sent to Germany together where they fought side by side in one of history's ugliest wars.

One sweltering day during a fierce battle, amid heavy gunfire, bombing, and close-quarters combat, they were given the command to retreat. As the men were running back, Jim noticed that Phillip had not returned with the others. Panic gripped his heart. Jim knew if Phillip was not back in another minute or two, then he wouldn't make it.

Jim begged his commanding officer to let him go after his friend, but the officer forbade the request, saying it would be suicide.

Risking his own life, Jim disobeyed and went after Phillip. His heart pounding, he ran into the gunfire, calling out for Phillip. A short time later, his platoon saw him hobbling across the field carrying a limp body in his arms.

Jim's commanding officer upbraided him, shouting that it was a foolish waste of time and an outrageous risk. "Your friend is dead," he added, "and there was nothing you could do."

"No sir, you're wrong," Jim replied. "I got there just in time. Before he died, his last words were 'I knew you would come.'"

Are you that kind of friend?

If we are living in a rat race, one of the ways it gets better is when we are able to discover value of companionship.

Conclusion: what do we need to do?

1. For some, it means taking a look at friendships we already have. What could you and your friends do to make your friendship more meaningful? I think this is particularly pertinent to men who tend generally to have fewer friends than women.
2. If it is not obvious, perhaps you need to ask God to bring friends across your path.
3. Watch out for isolated people who need to be included. Remember that the plight of the oppressed in Ecclesiastes 4 was that there was no one to comfort them.
4. Adopt the relational style of Jesus. Although he was talking in the context of leadership, what he said in Mark 10 is true for any kind of relationship. He had come not to be served, but to serve. While you will need people around you who will build something into your life, you need to be giving.