

“The Folly of Isolation”
Ecclesiastes 4:8-12
(Preached at Trinity, July 2, 2023)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. The preacher is continuing to skillfully take us from one experiment to another, testing every condition of the human experience to see if anything had meaning, purpose, and value. His conclusions continue to be consistent. Without God it is all vanity and chasing after the wind.
2. In **Verses 8-12** he examines the importance of community. Can a man function well by himself? On one hand, human beings exist in the context of community. We are surrounded by other people. We've already seen this in this chapter.
 - A. In the first verses of this chapter Solomon had us consider oppression, both the oppressed and the oppressor. For both, the worst thing is being isolated.
Ecclesiastes 4:1 NAU - "And behold / *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*."
 - B. For both the oppressed and the oppressor, being isolated is worse than death.
Ecclesiastes 4:3 NAU - "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."
3. Then in **Verses 4-6** Solomon called attention again to our labors. Again, it is in the context of community. Solomon says labor is often motivated by envy. We care what others think.
4. Now, Solomon calls upon us to see how desperately we need other people. He wants us to see the folly of isolation.

The American model has always been independence. The model of a "self-made man." Rugged individualism. Americans don't really understand the importance of community. This has often been detrimental to the church, which by its very nature is a body, a community where the individual becomes a part of the whole. Most select a church based on how it can serve them, not on how they can serve the church.

1 Corinthians 12:13-14 NAU - "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ For the body is not one member, but many."
5. God's plan for humanity was clearly stated at creation:
Genesis 2:18 NAU - "Then the LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him."

- 6. Loneliness and isolation plagues humanity. It has often been the theme of pop music.

The Beatles in 1966 – Eleanor Rigby

All the lonely people

Where do they all come from?

All the lonely people

Where do they all belong?

The Three Dog Night song from 1969 where they repeat over and over,

“One is the loneliest number.”

Or the song by Eric Carmen in 1975:

“All by myself

Don't want to be all by myself anymore”

7. In the 1980's 20% of adults said they were lonely.

A survey in 2013 showed the number had risen to 40%.

In 2022 the number stood at 58%.

There are many reasons we could ascribe to this but one stands out as chief? We are living in a Christless world; a world void of His kind presence and a world void of other Christians. And we are void of the Biblical teaching on the importance of community.

7. In **Verses 8-12** Solomon covers several categories of isolation. All of them are detrimental. He states the conclusion at the beginning.

Ecclesiastes 4:7 NAU - "Then I looked again at vanity under the sun."

I. The isolation from family – **Verse 8**

A. Solomon describes a situation where a man is lacking any heirs –

1. “without dependent” - Neither son nor brother

2. Solomon has already called attention to the brevity of our lives.

Ecclesiastes 1:3-4 NAU - "What advantage does man have in all his work which he does under the sun? ⁴ A generation goes and a generation comes, But the earth remains forever."

3. We labor our whole life and amass some possessions. Who will manage them and enjoy them after we are gone?

For Solomon, there is great sorrow to leave the fruit of our labors to those we don't know.

Ecclesiastes 2:18-19 NAU - "Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. ¹⁹ And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity."

Ecclesiastes 4:8 NAU - "And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?" This too is vanity and it is a grievous task."

B. Family is the source comfort, of community, of love and devotion.

1. There is joy in laboring, knowing our children and grandchildren will enjoy the fruit of our labors.

2. There is a whole generation that has arisen that does not value family. Marriage is not valued and having children is not seen as important. There is a term given today that describes many couples: DINK – Double income, no kids. They are content to have their pets, often referring to

them as their children.

3. Some have family but choose to be isolated from them. They fail to see the ultimate sorrow of such isolation.

II. The isolation from co-laborers – **Verses 9-10**

- A. Two or more can accomplish much more than a person laboring alone.
 1. Obviously, this is true where manpower is needed. Much more can be done with multiplied laborers.
 2. It is also true with other forms of collaboration. There are many digital tools that aid collaboration.
 3. Two produce a better profit than one.
Ecclesiastes 4:9 NAU - "they have a good return for their labor."
- B. Some choose independence, isolation.
 1. They say they don't work well with others. They support the saying, "If you want something done right, do it yourself." This is sometimes true, but it is also true that we need others in our work.
 2. Excellent managers learn how to lead others to be productive and how to delegate tasks. They know the value of teamwork.
Solomon says, "they have a good return for their labor."
 3. No one possesses all gifts and talents. We are strengthened by abilities of others.
Ecclesiastes 4:10 NAU - "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."

III. The isolation from the comfort of companionship – **Verse 11**

- A. Solomon describes the simple axiom of companionship.
Ecclesiastes 4:11 NAU - "if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm *alone*?"
 1. Travelers in ancient Israel traveled in groups and slept side-by-side for warmth.
 2. Warmth can also imply comfort. In the church we comfort and encourage one another.
 3. Hebrews 10:24 expresses this well.
Hebrews 10:24-25 NAU - "and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*, and all the more as you see the day drawing near."
- B. We need encouragement from one another.
 1. When Paul was in prison he felt the pain of loneliness, of physical discomfort. He knew he really wasn't alone.

- a. Chiefly, he had Jesus.
2 Timothy 4:16-18 NAU - "At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them. ¹⁷ But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that through me the proclamation might be fully accomplished, and that all the Gentiles might hear; and I was rescued out of the lion's mouth. ¹⁸ The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him *be* the glory forever and ever. Amen."
 - b. Paul was a part of the Christian community. He looked to the brethren as sources of encouragement.
2 Corinthians 7:6-7 NAU - "But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; ⁷ and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more."
 - c. This was also affirmed to Paul when he entered Corinth. It was a fearful place but he received this word from Christ.
Acts 18:9-10 NAU - "And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid *any longer*, but go on speaking and do not be silent; ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city."
2. Writing to Philemon Paul describes the "fellowship of faith." Christian fellowship is an important part of the Christian life, but few Christians really understand the meaning. We think of "fellowship" as a social gathering. We call our shared meals as "fellowship meals." Douglas O'Donnell writes: "Fellowship is more than sharing a cup of coffee after the service; it is sharing life together—sharing sorrows, fears, and pains—so that together we might fight the good fight, finish the race, keep the faith, and long for the glory of Christ's appearing."¹

IV. The isolation from the strength of numbers – **Verse 12**

- A. This is a rational reality.
 1. An army is made up of platoons, battalions, units, etc.
 2. On a dark street we feel more comfortable as a group.
 3. A group always has more influence than an individual.
 4. Class action lawsuits are often more effective than suing individually.
- B. The Christian Church has always enjoyed strength in numbers.
 1. Jesus sent His disciples out in pairs.
Luke 10:1 NAU - "Now after this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them in pairs ahead of Him to every city and place where He Himself was going to come."

¹ Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Ecclesiastes*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Iain M. Duguid, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 103.

2. Paul and Barnabas traveled together in their missionary campaigns. **Acts 13:2-3 NAU** - "While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away."

When Paul and Barnabas ceased their travels together Paul chose Silas to replace him.

Acts 15:39-40 NAU - "And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. ⁴⁰ But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord."

Conclusion:

1. Solomon's point is to stress the importance of community. Isolationism is futility.
2. Charles Bridges wrote: "Oh! let us ponder well the deep responsibility of our social obligations. Are we discharging them as unto the Lord—for the honour of his name, and for the edifying and increase of his Church? Did we but pray for each other as we ought, what a brotherhood would the family of man be! The time is short. Opportunities are passing away. Happy those, who have been fellow-helpers upon earth! They shall rejoice before their gracious Lord with joy unspeakable—uninterrupted—without abatement—without end."²

² Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of the Book of Ecclesiastes* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1860), 125.