



Ecclesiastes 4:1-12
 Ecclesiastes: Wisdom for Today
 Doing Life In Community

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For the last few weeks we have been in a series in the book of Ecclesiastes, looking at some of the significant themes, questions, and points of wisdom that are contained in this most unusual book of the Bible. And today we get a passage that reminds us of one of the great human needs. This need has been addressed throughout history, from the opening chapters of Scripture right through contemporary poets and musicians and authors of today. Perhaps no one encapsulates the message of today's passage better in music than the rock band, Three Dog Night, with this song that reached #5 on the Billboard charts in 1969... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5ab8BOu4LE> (For those reading online/print: we watched the first minute in the service.)

One Is The Loneliest Number isn't based on today's passage, but it *is* a reminder of the need for community, which is what we'll read about in just a moment. An interesting fact about the song is that the guy who wrote it, Harry Nilsson, did so after calling someone and getting a busy signal. Remember those? 😊 They're pretty much a thing of the past. But he got a busy signal and then stayed on the line listening the "beep, beep, beep..." tone while writing the song. And that busy signal actually is replicated in the opening notes of the song.¹

And today's passage is a reminder that it's not good to be alone, and the passage goes through several different kinds of life situations that either lead to being alone or stem from being alone, and then gives us the antidote. So grab your Bible or a pew Bible (p. 1038) or just follow along on the screen as we read Ecclesiastes 4:1-12. (**Scripture passage here**).

Sometimes in life you go through a difficult stretch and you just need someone to commiserate with; Someone who will sit with you in your pain and anguish and not just recite a bunch of platitudes that "you'll be all right" and "everything will be ok." You *know* that eventually everything will be ok. Intellectually understanding that isn't the problem. But sometimes we're living in our emotions much more than our intellect, and we just need someone to be with us in our pain, grief, sadness, frustration, anger, or

whatever it is that we may be feeling at the moment.

Some days, or even for whole seasons of life, we can be in a low place due to bad news from the doctor for yourself or a loved one, a difficult situation at work, a marital disagreement that hangs over the household...your collegiate football team not living up to expectations. If misery loves company then Huskies and Cougars are hanging out together quite a bit this fall. It may not even take much to send us into that emotionally difficult place – a harsh word, an unhelpful comment, a phone call or an email that sets us off in the wrong direction. **Ecclesiastes sits with us in those places. It's not filled with platitudes. It meets us in our emotions and even expresses them when we cannot.** And so that's the first point I want to make this morning. It's not specifically about this passage – though we get it in today's passage in verse 3. But Ecclesiastes is often like the friend who will just commiserate with us.

One person in the congregation shared with me why Ecclesiastes is one of her favorite books in the Bible, and in her email, here's part of what she wrote, "Ecclesiastes also feels so "Real" - nothing sugar coated. At times, the meaninglessness of life can be attractive. Especially in times of dismay, it's nice to have company. Misery loves company is what they say." And Ecclesiastes does that at times, including in today's passage.

Biblical scholar and commentator Robert Davidson puts it like this, **"It is good to know that there is, here in the Bible, one who enters into our different moods, who has shared our blackest moments, who has been where we have sometimes been, and can give poignant and vivid expression that we sometimes find difficult to put into words or to share with other people"** (Robert Davidson, Daily Study Bible, on Ecclesiastes 4:3).

So that's kind of a general comment about Ecclesiastes: that God meets us in our loneliness through his Word in a unique way here in Ecclesiastes, which mostly sits with us in our pain and loss and difficulties in life. It acknowledges that life is not always cheery.

Then there are some specific observations that Koholeth – the Teacher – makes about people that are all connected by their loneliness. First, he sees oppression all around. It’s a grievous situation as he finds the oppressed in tears and without anyone to comfort them. They’re all alone. (In the lobby before the service, I was talking with someone who told me about how her husband has been working late during the weekdays and working several hours – often on each day – on the weekends...this is a kind of modern day “oppression”. So we see this even in every-day situations still.) Then he looks at those who are the oppressors, and perhaps somewhat unexpectedly he comes to the same conclusion about them: that they also have no comforter. So: **Both the oppressor and the oppressed have no comforter. There’s a loneliness in the midst of this evil.** And because of the evil there certainly is no sense of community between the oppressor and the oppressed; they are driven apart from one another, creating a wider divide between them.

His concluding statement in regards to this is in verse 3: that it is better to be dead and not anymore have to witness the way we humans treat one another ...or even better is never to have been born at all. Now, that is not the final word on life and death in Ecclesiastes, as he affirms elsewhere that life is better than death (9:4), and he frequently writes of the enjoyment we can experience in life and the gift of God that it is when we experience the joy of living.

But in the observations of the oppressed and the oppressor we see loneliness: there’s no comforter for the oppressed, none for the oppressor, and to observe the way people tend to treat one another is depressing and there’s no comfort in that, either. There’s loneliness all over the place in these first few verses.

But there’s more! In verse 4 he observes that the actual reason people work and seek to achieve things in life is not to make the world a better place, bring peace on earth, and solve the world’s problems as we might think. Instead, his observation is that: **People work and achieve things because: they envy their neighbor.** Envy motivates people to accomplish stuff. They want to keep up with the Joneses and even surpass them...create a better and better widget than the next person...buy a better car and bigger home. And there is loneliness in this, too, because envy and one-upmanship is not

something that brings people together. Instead, it turns relationships into a competition.

Verse 5 is a comment on laziness and its outcome and verse 6 is a measured response about being satisfied with what you've got, but then he returns to observations about the one who works all the time...who toils away. **The outcome of all this work is stated at the beginning of verse 8: "There was a man who was all alone."** Has there ever been a sadder statement? For instance, can you imagine a book starting with that line? It foreshadows a sad book. And the reason he's lonely is his own fault: Because he obsessively toils away at his work, always wanting more, to the detriment of his relationships.

One really is the loneliest number. And even in our 21st century world that is all about staying connected, a lot of people still struggle with being alone. Studies have shown that one side effect of social media is that even though a person may have several hundred or a even a couple thousand "friends": **Social media frequently increases people's sense of loneliness.** Seeing everyone else's perfectly smiling faces, lovely vacations, and kids as cute as can be who *never ever* throw a tantrum on Facebook...makes you feel "less than" and imperfect...like you're different from all these so-called "perfect people" on social media...and in the end we can feel very alone. There are glimpses of the full picture of reality...but Social media has tendency to make us feel "less than" and alone.

We see it around us, too: Drive by a lovely house with perfectly manicured lawn and we presume that their life is better off than ours...everything must be perfect inside the home just as is outside – right? Because we mostly see the successes and perfection, it only *adds* pressure to do exactly what Ecclesiastes talks about here: spend all of our time trying to keep up with everyone else...And so we end up even *more* alone as we do that and it chips away at our face to face relationship. How many marriages are riddled with loneliness because of one or both spouses' work habits (not all bad work habits are forced upon us), which are fueled by the desire to keep with others, which is an exacerbated desire because of what we see on our phones and computer screens, etc.? Ecclesiastes beautifully articulates the problem for us

in the 21st Century.

So what's the solution? The solution is to stop the comparisons, stop trying to keep up with others, stop doing things that draw us apart from others and drive us into loneliness...and instead: **Engage with real people in real life and develop real relationships.** And this writing from over 2,000 years ago makes this very contemporary point. Verse 9 says it's better to have a partner than go it alone. This is true in so many facets of life (many people presume "marriage" is the context here, but it's really not – actually more like business partners, but the application is broad regardless). You share in the labor and the fruits of your labor as verse 9 says; you have someone to help you get up when you fall down (literally, or metaphorically) as verse 10 says. Verse 11 speaks to helping one another keep warm. I can't tell you how many times in our marriage that right after I crawl into bed, Gwen sticks her cold feet under my legs to get them warmed up. I'm not complaining...it's an honor and a joy...but I've lived that verse out *countless* times. Then he also adds another benefit, that there's safety in numbers.

And then the caper on all of this is the final statement in verse 12: **"...A cord of three strands is not quickly broken"** (Ecclesiastes 4:12). It's a simple metaphor to drive the point home that we are better off in community. We need to do life with others.

Throughout Scripture the three strands we see that we need are ourselves, God, and others. A three-strand cord is *not* made up of me, myself and I. ☺ Just want to be clear...that doesn't count! The opening verses of the Bible tell us that God created us in His image. There's a built-in connection between us and God, and God invites us to live in relationship with Him. And it's a genuine, real relationship, not filled with pat answers for our questions, or judgment for our imperfections. Earlier I shared with you the quote from Robert Davidson, "It is good to know that there is, here in the Bible, one who enters into our different moods, who has shared our blackest moments, who has been where we have sometimes been..." While that was written about Ecclesiastes, it is true of Jesus as well. **Jesus has been where we've been, entered into our moods, shared our blackest moments.** He faced hunger, thirst, temptation, betrayal, false accusations, stood trial, was stressed out to

the point of sweating blood, he shed tears of sadness, and went to the cross where he bore the physical pain of the crucifixion and the spiritual pain of the sins of the world. Jesus understands your pain and sorrow, and he doesn't sit in judgment of you for it, but he sits with you in the midst of it and says, "I've been there, too."

And then also, **God has created us to be in community with each other.** We see that first in Genesis 2:18 when we read that God observed the man he'd made and saw that it wasn't good for him to be alone, so he made the woman, fashioning her from one of his ribs. The story is told of a little boy who was holding his side and grimacing in pain. His mom asked what was wrong. He said, "I think I'm going to have a wife!" ☺ The point here is: they're in community because God saw that it wasn't good to be alone. One *is* the loneliest number and it's not how we're created to be. God made us to do life in community: with God and with others... and *particularly* with others who are in relationship with God as well. That's what makes a three-strand-cord strong: when the three strands are intertwined. Three strands just laying next to each other is not enough. God has created us for all three to be intertwined, wrapped up together.

So one really is the loneliest number. And: **Although there may only be one of you in all of history, God didn't make you to be on your own.** You're created to be in relationship with Him. And the Church is where we get connected with others to give us a three-strand cord with God and others that will help us get through the difficulties in life. We're going to face challenges: raising kids, marital struggles, family issues, job loss, death of loved ones, and so much more, where we need the support of other people. Some of those things might even send us into a tailspin where we need Ecclesiastes and God's people to just sit with us for a bit in the midst of our grief. And if we don't have that three-strand cord of ourselves, then we're missing out. God created you and me to be in community with him and with others who are in relationship with him as well. So keep doing life together: with God and with each other and inviting others into that three-strand cord as well. Let's Pray...Amen.

ⁱ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_\(Harry_Nilsson_song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_(Harry_Nilsson_song))