

## Ecclesiastes Chapter Four

### Unfulfilled Expectations

#### Lamenting Social Oppression (1-3)

**VERSE 1 Then I looked again at all the acts of oppression which were being done**

**under the sun** (וּשְׁבַתִּי אֲנִי וְאַרְאֶה אֶת-כָּל-הָעֲשָׂקִים אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשִׂים תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ) [waw

w/Qal perf.1s. shub return; “I again” + pro.1s. ani I + waw w/Qal impf.1s. ra-ah see; “looked”

+ d.o. + noun m.s.constr. kol all + d.a.w/Qal pass.part.ashaq oppress + rel.pro. asher which +

Niphal part.m.p.abs. ashah do + prep tachath under + d.a.w/noun both s.abs. shemesh sun]).

**And behold I saw the tears of the oppressed and that they had no one to comfort**

**them** (וְהִנֵּה דִמְעַת הָעֲשָׂקִים וְאֵין לָהֶם מְנַחֵם) [waw w/interj hinneh behold + noun

f.s.constr. dema tears + d.a.w/Qal pass.part.m.p.abs. ashaq oppress + waw w/part. ayin no one

+ prep. lamed w/3m.p.suff. + Piel part.m.s.abs. nacham comfort; be sorry for]; **and on the**

**side of their oppressors was power, but they had no one to comfort them** (מִנְיָחָם

וְאֵין לָהֶם עֲשָׂקֵיהֶם כַּח וְאֵין לָהֶם) [waw w/prep min w/noun f.s.constr. yad hand; “side” + Qal

part.m.p.constr.w/3m.p.suff. ashaq “their oppressors” + noun m.s.abs. koach power + waw

w/part. ayin no one + prep lamed w/3m.p.suff. + Piel part.m.s.abs. nacham comfort]).

**VERSE 2 So I congratulated the dead who are already dead more than the living**

**who are still living** (אֲנִי אֶת־הַמֵּתִים שֶׁכָּבַר מִתּוֹ מִן־הַחַיִּים אֲשֶׁר הָמָּה חַיִּים עֲדָנָהּ)

וְשִׁבַּח [waw w/Piel infin.abs. shabach soothe; praise; “congratulated” + pro.1s. ani + d.o. + d.a.w/Qal part.m.p.abs. muth die; “the dead” + rel.pro w/adv. kebar already + Qal perf.3m.s. muth die + prep min “more than” + d.a.w/adj.m.p.abs. chay living + rel.pro. asher who + pro.3m.p. chem. Who + adj.m.p.abs. chay living + adv. ad “still”]).

**VERSE 3 But better off than both of them is the one who has never existed** (הִיָּה)

לֹא [waw w/adj.m.s.abs. tob “better” + prep min w/adj.m. dual

constr.w/3m.p.suff. shenayim two; “both” + d.o. + rel.pro. asher w/adv. adh + neg lo + Qal perf.3m.s. hayah]), **who has never seen the evil activity that is done under the sun**

אֲשֶׁר לֹא־רָאָה אֶת־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה הַרָּע אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשֶׂה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַשׁ

[rel.pro. asher + neg lo + Qal perf.3m.s. ra-ah see + d.o. + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. ma-asheh deed: “activity” + d.a.w/adj.m.s.abs. roa evil + rel.pro. asher + prep tachath under + d.a.w/noun both s.abs. shemesh sun]).

**ANALYSIS: VERSES 1-3**

1. These verses raise the issue of the social oppression of the lower classes by the elite in the world.
2. By this juncture in the book we are not surprised to hear from the author that we cannot do anything about it.
3. He begins his account of oppression in the same detached manner that characterizes other topics (“I returned and considered all the oppression that was taking place under the sun.” Alternate translation.).
4. The consideration of this plague over humanity is viewed from the standpoint of the emotional trauma that the oppressed endure in the cosmos.
5. Crying and the absence of comforters overwhelm the author.
6. In this section he does not enjoin others to resist the oppressors.
7. He simply resigns himself to this terrible reality declaring that “power” is on the side of the instigators.

8. He laments, yet again, that the oppressed “have no one to comfort them.”
9. In Ecclesiastes wherever this topic is discussed the author never calls for resistance (3:16; 8:9, 10).
10. He is just sorry for the plight of the oppressed.
11. The repetition of “there is no one to comfort them” is designed to express the author’s passion regarding the plight of the oppressed.
12. In v. 2 he expresses his utter dismay over this social evil of the strong over the weak by saying that it is better to be dead than live in such a world.
13. Here we have yet another so-called ‘better than’ proverbs.
14. The author is reactive here by favoring death over life.
15. Here and in the next verse the dead are to be favored over the living as the dead are set free from oppression.
16. In v. 4 the thought of v. 3 is taken one step further.
17. In two verses in Ecclesiastes Solomon advocates pleasure as a solace against the harsh realities of life (5:20; 8:15).
18. At least two other biblical characters entertained a death-wish in the face of oppressive enemies.
19. Jonah (Jon. 4:3) and Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:4) wished for death, but in both these instances God corrected them (Jon. 4:10-11; 1 Kgs. 19:4-9).
20. Verse 3 intensifies the thought of v. 2.
21. In v. 2 he said it is better to be dead than to live.
22. Here he goes beyond that sentiment by asserting that it was better never to have lived than to have lived and died.
23. “But better off than both of them” refers to those in the previous verse who are alive and oppressed versus those who lived and were oppressed but are now dead.
24. The third and unexpected person is the non-person, that is, the one who never lived at all and experienced oppression.
25. This sentiment was advanced by Job (3:3-5) and Jeremiah (Jer. 20:18).
26. Note Ps. 73 for a related but different attitude expressed by an Israelite who fretted over the prosperity of the oppressive wicked.
27. From the word of God we know how to deal with the oppression and injustice of the ruling class.
28. We know that there will be for the righteous a time when oppression and injustice will be a thing of the past and the righteous will rule and reign with Christ.

## Lamenting Evils Associated with Labor (vv. 4-8)

**VERSE 4** I have seen that every labor and every skill which is done is *the result of*

**rivalry between a man and his neighbor** (הַמַּעֲשֵׂה כִּי הִיא קִנְיַת־אִישׁ מִרְעֵהוּ)

וְרָאִיתִי אֲנִי אֶת־כָּל־עֲמָל וְאֵת כָּל־כְּשָׁרוֹן [waw w/Qal perf.1s. ra-ah see + pro.1s. ani +

d.o. + noun m.s.constr. kol every + noun m.s.abs. amal labor + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. ma-asheh

deed; “skill” + part ki which + pro.3m.s. hi he + noun f.ss.constr. qinah zeal; “rivalry” + noun

m.s.abs. ish man + prep min w/noun m.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff. re-a friend; neighbor]).

**This too is vanity and striving after wind** (גַּם־זֶה הֶבֶל וְרַעוּת רוּחַ) [conj gam too +

adj.m.s.abs. zeh this + noun m.s.abs.hebel vanity + waw w/noun f.s.constr. re-uth striving +

noun both s.abs. ruach wind]).

**VERSE 5** The fool folds his hands and consumes his own flesh (וְאָכַל אֶת־בְּשָׂרוֹ)

וְחָבַק אֶת־יָדָיו הַכְּסִיל [d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. kesil fool + Qal part.m.s.abs. chabaq embrace;

fold + d.o. + noun f. dual constr.w/3m.s.suff. yad hand + waw w/Qal part.m.s.abs. akal eat +

d.o. + noun m.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff. bashar flesh]).

**VERSE 6** One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving

**after wind** (טוֹב מְלֵא כַף נַחַת מִמְּלֵא חַפְּנִים עֲמָל וְרַעוּת רוּחַ) [adj.m.s.abs. tob “is

better” + noun m.s.abs. milo full + noun f.s.abs. kap palm of hand + noun f.s.abs. nachath rest

+ prep min w/noun m.s.abs. milo full + d.a/w/noun m. dualabs. chopen hollow of hand + noun

m.s.abs. amal labor+ waw w/noun f.s.constr. te-uth striving + noun both s.abs. ruach wind]).

**VERSE 7** Then I looked again at vanity under the sun (וַאֲרָאָה הַבֶּל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ)

וַאֲרָאָה הַבֶּל תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ [waw wQal perf.1s. shub turn; “look” + pro.1s. ani + waw w/Qal impf.1ss. ra-ah “looked” + noun m.s.abs. chebel vanity + prep tachath under + d.a.w/noun both s.abs. shemesh]).

**VERSE 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 (בֶּן וְאָח אֵינֶנּוּ וְאֵין קֵץ לְכָל-עֲמָלוֹ)

בֶּן וְאָח אֵינֶנּוּ וְאֵין קֵץ לְכָל-עֲמָלוֹ [part yesh there is/was + adj.m.s.abs. echad one; certain + waw adv. ayin without + adj.m.s.abs. shemi second; “a dependent” + conj gam also + noun m.s.abs. ben son + waw w/noun m.s.abs. ach brother + adv ayin neither + prep lamed + waw wadv ayin no + noun m.s.abs. gets end + rep lamed w/noun m.s.constr. kol + noun m.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff. amal labor]).

Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches and he never asked, "And for

whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure (וּמַחֲסֵר אֶת-נַפְשִׁי מִטוֹבָה)

וּמַחֲסֵר אֶת-נַפְשִׁי מִטוֹבָה [conj gam also + noun f. dual constr.w/3m.s.suff. ayin eye + neg lo + Qal impf.3f.s. shebe-a be satisfied + noun m.s.abs. osher riches + waw w/prep lamed w/pro.interrog. mi “And for whom” + pro.1s. ani I + noun m.s.abs. amal labor + waw wPiel part.m.s.abs. chaser lack; “depriving” + d.o. + noun f.s.constr.w/1s.suff. nephesh soul; “myself” + prep min w/noun f.s.abs. tob good; “pleasure”])?]

**This too is vanity and it is a grievous task** (וְעֵינֵיךָ הוּא גַם־זֶה הַבֶּל [waw w/conj

*gam + adj.m.s.abs. zeh this + noun m.s.abs. chebel vanity + waw w/noun m.s.constr. inyan task*

*+ adj.m.s.abs. ra evil + pro.3m.s. hi it]).*

### ANALYSIS: VERSES 4-8

1. In these verses Solomon laments ills associated with labor/work.
2. He presents three examples of vanity in the realm of labor.
3. The first has to do with “every toil and skill” that produces success but is based on envy of one’s neighbor (v. 4).
4. The term translated “rivalry” (NAS) is the noun *qin-ah* derives from the verb (*qana*) meaning to be jealous/envious.
5. Jealousy is used in both a positive (good) and negative way in the Bible.
6. For the good there is the divine-human relationship (Isa. 11:13; 26:11; Ps. 69:9; Nah. 1:2) and the marriage relationship (Num. 5:14, 30; Prov. 6:34).
7. These two relationships require exclusivity, but in all other relationships, jealousy is damaging (cf. Prov. 14:30 “A tranquil heart is life to the body, but envy is rotteness to the bones.”).
8. It is the bad manifestation of this term that Solomon is talking about here.
9. Jealousy or rivalry of neighbors is due to covetousness and this constitutes the breaking of the 10 commandment (Ex. 20:17).
10. Here selfish ambition, and the efforts needed to outdo one’s neighbor, is labeled “vanity and chasing after the wind.”
11. This type of ambition can never be satisfied, so it leads to ceaseless efforts.
12. Example #2 (v. 5) is presented in a terse, pity, and sarcastic manner, and parallels the book of Proverbs (6:9-11; 10:4; 12:24; 19:15; 20:13; 24:30-34).
13. The intention of the proverb is to ridicule the lazy fool.
14. People who refuse to work (“fold their hands”; see Prov. 6:10; 24:33) end up with the ills associated with self-imposed impoverishment (“eats his own flesh”).
15. The implication is that they will kill themselves by not taking care of themselves.
16. Of course he is sarcastically using hyperbole (exaggeration).
17. He is mocking the lazy person.
18. They do not earn food so they must eat themselves (cannibalism)!
19. At first reading v. 6 appears to be in contradiction to v. 5.
20. V. 6 is also a proverb which is introduced by the ‘better than’ formula featured in Proverbs (Prov. 3:14; 8:11, 19; 16:32; 22:1; cf. Ps. 84:10; 13x in Eccl.).
21. The proverb “One hand full of rest is better than two hands full of labor” is a recommendation of rest over being a workaholic.
22. “Two fists full of labor” is poetic language for such a person as opposed “to one hand full of rest.”
23. So the two examples in vv. 5 & 6 are both predicated on rest versus labor.
24. The first lead to starvation and the second is simply recommended apart from citing the ill effects of inadequate rest.

25. In the first phrase rest is portrayed in a positive light, but the second in a negative light, with the familiar “chasing after the wind.”
26. There is a parallel in Prov. 26:4-5, where not speaking and speaking, are both recommended when dealing with a fool.
27. In vv. 7-8 we have reflections on the lonely miser.
28. V. 7 should read: “Then I turned and observed” and introduces a new example.
29. The author has been observing meaninglessness (vanity) thus far in this book.
30. Here he condemns this example of human behavior before he presents it in contrast to the examples thus far.
31. Some translations add a word or a phrase before “vanity” (“something meaningless” or “an example of meaninglessness”).
32. In v. 8 the point is made by an antidote introduced by the particle *yesh* (“there exists”; cf. 2:21).
33. It is the sad story of a man who is absent any human relationship of any type.
34. “Without a dependant” (*echad we'en seni*) is an inclusive expression indicating he had no friend, no business partner, and no wife.
35. Furthermore, he had no son or brother which are the two closest generational relationships between males.
36. He had no one who might benefit from his toil through inheritance.
37. This type of person is further depicted as spending all his time working hard to amass money, and never deriving any personal pleasure from his considerable wealth.
38. The words “for whom do I toil” introduces an abrupt transition into this verse.
39. Up to this point the lonely miser is referred to in the third person.
40. Here the first person is interjected.
41. This story has the miser never stopping to ask himself the question “And for whom am I laboring and deriving myself of pleasure.”
42. This most definitely is an extreme example of an obsessive behavior related to labor, and the neglect to self, living a meager existence, hoarding wealth for wealth’s sake.
43. The *hebel* (vanity) formula labels this lifestyle as “and grievous task” (cf. 1:13) as it posed an immeasurable hardship on the participant, just as in the case of the lazy fool.