

Observing Oppression (4:1–3)

Four elements in verse 1 accentuate the text's emotional intensity:

1. the root word for 'oppress' occurs three times, indicating a major theme of the passage;
2. 'behold' lends a dramatic effect;
3. 'tears' and 'comfort' highlight the emotional side of the situation; and,
4. the repetition of 'no one to comfort'³ emphasizes the hopeless condition of the oppressed individual.

The writer does not approach this section dispassionately; he personally identifies with the reality of oppression and with the abuse of power.

Solomon employs the root word for 'oppress' only two other times in the book (5:8 and 7:7). Elsewhere he uses the root five times (Ps. 72:4; Prov. 14:31; 22:16; 28:3, 17), demonstrating that he pos-

³ See these elements identified by Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, 81.

sessed knowledge of oppressive rulers and their oppressed subjects. Thus, scholars should hesitate to rule Solomon out as the author of Ecclesiastes, just because it speaks of oppression. In Solomon's time, as throughout human history, possessors of power perpetrated oppression ('on the side of their oppressors was power,' v. 1). Although Solomon does not seem to have suffered from oppression himself, he must have been aware of his father's history under Saul. The text declares that he observes the 'tears of the oppressed,' revealing his sympathy for them. He also noted that oppressed persons feel helpless and hopeless, because they have 'no one to comfort *them*' (stated twice for emphasis). He might realize that his descendants will face oppression following the division of his kingdom (see [1 Kings 11](#)).

Similar declarations occur in Job ([16:2](#); [21:34](#); [30:28](#)) and five times in [Lamentations 1](#) (vv. 2, 9, 16, 17, 21) as well as [Psalm 69:20](#); [Isaiah 54:11](#), and [Zechariah 10:2](#), in order to emphasize a pathetic condition. The repetition sets the stage for the later discussion of loneliness and companionship (vv.

7–12). Readers of the New Testament cannot help but be reminded that God’s people receive comfort from all three Persons of the Godhead (Acts 9:31; 2 Cor. 1:3–7). God champions the cause of the oppressed (Pss. 9:9; 10:17–18; 103:6; 146:7).

Solomon congratulates (or, praises) the dead for being better off than the oppressed who cannot enjoy their life under the sun (v. 2; cp. Job 3:3–5, 11–19; Jer. 20:14–18). In 3:15–17 the writer advances future divine justice as the resolution of oppression. Here (4:1–3), however, death itself (even before the time of divine vindication and establishment of justice) offers a better alternative. This is consistent with the logical development of the text, since Solomon introduces a discussion of death in the intervening section (3:18–22).⁴ Even better off is the individual who never existed, who had never been born (4:3). Such ‘better (than)’ axioms occur twenty-three times in Ecclesiastes.⁵ The form also character-

⁴ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 306.

⁵ 2:24; 3:12, 22; 4:3, 6, 9, 13; 5:5; 6:3, 5, 9; 7:1 (2×), 2, 3, 5, 8 (2×), 10; 9:4, 16, 17, 18.

izes many of the wisdom statements contained in the central sections of the Book of Proverbs, where they appear twenty-four times.⁶

Should we characterize Solomon's attitude as cynical or skeptical in regard to the preference of death or non-existence to experiencing oppression? Leupold answers, 'There is nothing skeptical or cynical about such an attitude. It is the only permissible estimate that can be put upon earthly values apart from the heavenly.'⁷ Long ago, Franz Delitzsch commented on the statement that death or non-existence is better than living with oppression: 'so long as the central point of man's existence lies in the present life, and this is not viewed as the fore-court of eternity, there is no enduring consolation to lift us above the miseries of this present world.'⁸

⁶ 3:14 (2×); 8:11, 19 (2×); 12:9; 15:16, 17; 16:8, 16, 19, 32; 17:1; 19:1, 22; 21:9, 19; 22:1; 25:7, 24; 25:24; 27:5, 10; 28:6.

⁷ Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 104. Kelley, *The Burden of God*, 91–92 agrees: 'His attitude is not one of cynical resignation; he merely reflects soberly on what is inescapable for man in his rebellion against God.'

⁸ Delitzsch, *Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes*, 274.

Solomon's earlier assertion that God has 'set eternity' (3:11) in the hearts of human beings supplies a source for hope in the midst of the negative experiences of life.

For those who deny Solomonic authorship for Ecclesiastes, the text's discussion of oppression appears 'awkward when attributed to the mind of Solomon. Not only could Solomon have done something about oppression, but he, according to the historical books, contributed heavily to it in the last days of his life (1 Kings 11).'⁹ Such an approach ignores the depth of Solomon's God-given wisdom, the breadth of his international relationships, the extent of his access to the situations in many neighboring lands, and the variety of his personal experiences.

Scripture condemns the abuse of power. God consistently reminds His people of the sins of exploitation and oppression (Exod. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14; Ps. 62:10; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5). The godly not only refrain from oppressing others,

⁹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 132ff..

they actively seek justice for the oppressed (Deut. 16:19–20; Ps. 106:3; Prov. 21:3, 15; Isa. 1:17; Micah 6:8; cp. Matt. 23:23; Col. 4:1).

Observing Jealousy (4:4–6)

Envy, jealousy, covetousness, and greed all serve to motivate people to work with fervor for long hours. Jealousy carries with it a positive connotation only in regard to the relationship between God and His people and the marital relationship.¹⁰ Jealousy or envy divides families (Gen. 30:1; 37:11), kills (Job 5:2), harasses (Isa. 11:13), and produces anger (Prov. 6:34), ‘rottenness to the bones’ (perhaps illness, Prov. 14:30), and hatred (Ezek. 35:11). One should not envy a violent person (Prov. 3:31) or sinners (Prov. 23:17). No wonder the Scripture describes this sort of labor or work as ‘evil’ (Eccles. 4:3). Such activity displays a dog-eat-dog attitude wherein a person seeks to get ahead, even if he or she must step on

¹⁰ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 187. See Exod. 20:5; 34:14; Num. 5:14–30; 25:11, 13; Song of Solomon 8:6; Zech. 1:14; 8:2; cp. 2 Cor. 11:2.

colleagues in their climb to the top of the corporate ladder. In Walter Kaiser's examination of this passage, he acknowledges that 'men can be as cruel and inhuman to each other in unnecessary competition as they can be in oppression.'¹¹ Envy destroys others just as certainly as the exercise of oppressive power. It is more popular to criticize corporate greed and political oppression than to recognize that such great injustices originate with the envy and jealousy that too often motivates a person in his or her own drive to succeed at any cost.

Solomon constructs a contrast between verses 4 and 5. The avaricious individual of verse 4 displays too much ambition and too little contentment, whereas the indolent individual of verse 5 exhibits too little ambition and excessive contentment.¹² Folding the hands appears elsewhere in [Proverbs 6:10](#) and [24:33](#) depicting the slumber of a lazy person. Lying on their beds, they fold their hands over their chest or bosom as they sleep. Biblical wisdom

¹¹ Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes*, 72.

¹² Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books*, 322.

writers condemn laziness and associate the characteristic with fools (Prov. 6:9; 10:26; 12:27; 13:4; 15:19; 19:15, 24; 20:4; 21:25; 22:13; 24:30; 26:14, 16; cp. Matt. 25:24–30). Commentators understand ‘consumes his own flesh’ (v. 5) in at least three different ways: (1) self-cannibalism speaking metaphorically of self-destruction,¹³ (2) ‘still has his meat to eat,’¹⁴ (meaning that the fool does nothing, but still has food to eat), and (3) reducing oneself to poverty.¹⁵ The first of these appears to be most consistent with the imagery and the context.

By means of yet another proverb, the writer of Ecclesiastes expresses the truth that contentment can exist where the individual actually possesses fewer material goods, but finds satisfying rest (v. 6). ‘Fists’ consists of a word that indicates the cupping of the hands to be able ‘to take as much as possible’¹⁶ (see Exod. 9:8; Lev. 16:12; Prov. 30:4; Ezek.

¹³ Gordis, *Koheleth*, 241.

¹⁴ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 31.

¹⁵ Rankin and Atkins, ‘The Book of Ecclesiastes,’ 5:54; Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 114.

¹⁶ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 93; Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 115.

10:2, 7). In other words, preoccupation with the pursuit of wealth is as evil as laziness. Solomon declared in [Psalm 127:2](#):

It is vain for you to rise up early,
To retire late,
To eat the bread of painful labors;
For He gives to His beloved *even in his sleep*.

Elsewhere, he binds contentment to the believer's relationship to the Lord ([Prov. 15:16](#); [16:8](#)) and to harmonious and loving relationships with others ([Prov. 15:17](#))—the opposite effect to that of envy and jealousy.

Observing Loneliness ([4:7–12](#))

In the third reference to observation (v. [7](#)), Solomon gets directly to the usual summary declaration of 'vanity' ahead of reporting his observations. In verse [3](#) his summary omits the word, but depicts non-existence as preferable to oppression. Then, in verse [4](#), he brings the summary forward ('This too is vanity and striving after wind') after briefly describing

what he had observed. Whereas verses 1–3 speak of no comforter and verses 4–6 imply no rest, verses 7–12 dwell on the concept of no companion.¹⁷

An exact rendering of the opening words of verse 8 reveals both the concise nature of the statement and the usage of two numbers: ‘There is one and there is not a second.’ Thus the writer introduces a discussion of loneliness (the one alone) and companionship (the one with a second). In case the reader might think that Solomon speaks of marriage, he next qualifies what he means by ‘not a second:’ ‘neither a son nor a brother.’ Even David needs a Jonathan or a Joab. An individual who isolates himself or herself from companionship fails to experience community and its God-ordained blessings. Remember, God Himself declared of the perfect man in his unfallen state, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone’ (Gen. 2:18). God advocates companionship over solitary lives.

Self-made hermits tend to be selfish and focused on the riches they hope their labor will bring to

¹⁷ Kaiser, *Ecclesiastes*, 73.

them. ‘Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches’ (v. 8) reminds the reader of the earlier proverb in 1:8. A third mention arises in 5:10 where the writer offers further clarification: ‘He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance *with its income*.’ Why do people end up alone? According to Craig Bartholomew,

There are various reasons a person like this ends up alone. We can speculate as to why, and his workaholicism may provide a clue. It is more likely that for circumstantial reasons this person has found himself alone, and in this rough situation, he has sought meaning in work and wealth. But they fail to provide the meaning he seeks.¹⁸

Note that the translators of NASU have placed ‘*and he never asked*’ (v. 8) in italics. The phrase does not occur in the original language. However, the following question implies this transition at least in thought. Does Solomon himself ask the question, or is this just a general hypothetical illustration? Some commentators find in verses 7–8 a situation involv-

¹⁸ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 189.

ing the absence of an heir, while verses 9–12 involve the absence of a companion, and verses 13–16, the absence of a successor.¹⁹ Garrett offers a pithy and apropos synopsis: ‘Money is their only kin.’²⁰ Preoccupied with climbing the corporate ladder, a man often tells himself that he does so in order to take care of his family, but, in reality, he is caught up in his projects to make a name for himself. His family soon becomes a casualty due to his neglect for their real welfare.

Do you know someone who fits the illuminating examples that you read about here in Ecclesiastes? By keeping the descriptions general, Solomon invites all readers ‘to think of their own acquaintances and say, in effect, “I know somebody like that.”’²¹ He identifies three examples of solitary existence in contrast to companionship in order to make his point. All three might arise from the experience of travel in the ancient Near East. The first

¹⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 41.

²⁰ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 307.

²¹ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 139.

might refer to falling into a pit or a ravine (v. 10), the second might describe attempts to keep warm outdoors during the cold of night (v. 11; cp. 1 Kings 1:1–4), and the third might refer to highwaymen or robbers encountered along the road (v. 12). The lessons should not be restricted to travel, however. A helper, a comforter, and a defender all apply to many life settings.

References to a three-strand or three-ply rope (cord) occur in ancient Sumerian and Akkadian texts. In the Sumerian story of Gilgamesh's encounter with Humbaba, guardian of the Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh exhorts his friend Enkidu not to abandon his quest. He says, 'Two men will not die; the towed rope will not sink. A towrope of three strands cannot be cut. You help me and I will help you.'²² This mention of the three-strand rope concludes the section dealing with pairs of people. Such

²² John Day, 'Foreign Semitic Influence on the Wisdom of Israel and Its Appropriation in the Book of Proverbs,' in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel*, ed. by John Day et al. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 61. Cp. Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 143.

a numeric arrangement reflects the pattern $x + (x + 1)$, which occurs in a number of Old Testament passages. The Old Testament reveals the following patterns: one/two ([Ezra 10:13](#)), two/three ([Deut. 17:16](#); [Prov. 30:15](#); [Amos 4:8](#)), three/four ([Prov. 30:15](#), [18](#), [21](#), [29](#); [Amos 1:3](#), [6](#), [9](#), [11](#), [13](#); [2:1](#), [4](#), [6](#)), four/five ([Isa. 17:6](#)), five/six ([2 Kings 13:19](#)), six/seven ([Job 5:19](#); [Prov. 6:16](#)), and seven/eight ([Eccles. 11:2](#); [Micah 5:5](#)). Such a pattern normally implies fullness or a full measure.

Compare Jesus' statement in [Matthew 18:20](#): 'For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.' Indeed, since two are better than one, how much better might it be to have three people. And, how much better to have with those two or three the Lord Himself present!

Observing Politics ([4:13–16](#))

Besides the theme of political power and popularity, these verses contrast generations. Sometimes the aged lack wisdom and act foolishly ([Job 12:20](#)). On the other hand, the younger may be wiser than their

elders (Ps. 119:100). Old Testament writers employ the word ‘lad’ (*yeled*, v. 13) for Joseph at the age of seventeen (Gen. 37:30) and for the companions of Rehoboam when he was over the age of forty (1 Kings 12:8; cp. the first use of the term in Gen. 4:23), as well as utilizing the term to describe children of a very young age (Gen. 21:8; Exod. 2:9). Therefore, the contrast focuses on relative ages, not on someone who is very young.

Although many scholars have sought to identify this situation in history, they have failed to prove any satisfactory identification. Suggestions include Joseph (see v. 14, ‘he has come out of prison’) and Pharaoh as well as Saul and David. Another incident involves Solomon’s son Rehoboam who ignored the advice of his counselors (1 Kings 12:1–19). Henry Morris speculates that the entire story stems from the Lord’s revelation given to Solomon in 1 Kings 11:11–13. Solomon himself had become foolish and one of his servants whom Solomon had driven into exile in Egypt (1 Kings 11:26–40) would supplant his son, Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:1–24), though

Rehoboam would still retain power over one tribe.²³ The revelation that the Lord had given to Solomon was confirmed by the prophet Ahijah whom God sent to Jeroboam (1 Kings 11:29–39). If the illustration in Ecclesiastes 4:13–16 actually possesses a historical precedent, the prophetic announcements to Solomon and Jeroboam would seem to fit the best. However, insufficient evidence exists to enable a dogmatic identification. Even in the modern era, former political prisoners or exiled leaders occasionally replace a foolish regime. William Brown cites Iran, Nicaragua, South Africa, and South Korea as examples and notes that such replacements might be for good or for ill.²⁴

Prisons in the ancient Near East did not house only criminals and traitors. Often the prisons were filled with individuals unable to pay their debts or to fulfill their financial obligations.²⁵ (cp. Matt. 5:26; Luke 12:59). Thus, the text also mentions that the

²³ Morris, *The Remarkable Wisdom of Solomon*, 200–01.

²⁴ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 54.

²⁵ Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books*, 325–26.

second king was poor as well as the fact that he was born in poverty ([Eccles. 4:13–14](#)).

An underlying lesson within this historical or fictitious illustration applies to the wisdom of accepting advice and counsel. The king proves to be foolish when he ‘no longer knows *how* to receive instruction’ (v. [13](#)). The term used for ‘instruction’ might also be translated ‘admonition’ or even ‘warning.’ In essence, the aged king was acting as a loner, refusing to listen to his counselors. Proverbs identifies wise counsel as characteristic of the best plans and decisions ([11:14](#); [15:22](#); [20:18](#); [21:5](#); [24:6](#); cp. [Luke 14:31](#)). Of course, the best counsel comes from God Himself ([Prov. 16:1, 3, 9](#); [19:21](#)). The old king ignores this reality, choosing to act on his own.

When the writer says, ‘I have seen’ (v. [15](#)), this does not exclude Solomon from the authorship of the book. In one sense, if the reference is to Solomon, Jeroboam, and Rehoboam, Solomon has already seen it by the revelation God granted him as recorded in [1 Kings 11](#). If those three are not the royal personages in view, Solomon lives long

enough, experiences enough interaction with fellow royals throughout the Near East, and gathers enough information from his ships' voyages as far abroad as India and Africa to learn of such a situation in another land. In brief, wisdom, age, power, youth, political astuteness, and popularity all fail to guarantee political success or longevity. In the end, subsequent generations of citizens will forget both the wise and the foolish, the aged and the young, the popular and the unpopular.

Conclusion

Humankind constantly dreams of some sort of utopia on earth. Over and over again, generation after generation, political regime after political regime, people seek solutions to the problems of humanity in both the social and moral realms. They expend great wealth and power on attempting to right society's wrongs. Frustratingly, however, every attempt meets failure. All solutions prove to be temporary, at best. Every 'Great Society' comes to a time when it all collapses and the advances of

decades disappear in the dust of another depression, another war, or another natural disaster. Derek Kidner's keen observation about 4:1–3 provides a potential association between the oppression in verses 1–3 and the political inconsistencies of verses 13–16. He notes the paradox that a transfer of power to promote change actually 'limits the possibility of reform itself, because the more control the reformer wields, the more it tends to tyranny.'²⁶

The all-inclusive fallen condition of humanity defies selfrestoration. As Michael Kelley observes, "The masses willingly support revolution because they cannot believe that the fault lies in them."²⁷ The indelible sinful nature of fallen mankind prevents the success of setting up the kingdom of God apart from the return of Jesus Christ. Ideal social justice must await the Righteous One Himself.

²⁶ Kidner, *A Time to Mourn*, 44. While the observation on vv. 1–3 is Kidner's, he fails, at least in this source, to make the link to vv. 13–16.

²⁷ Kelley, *The Burden of God*, 94.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why are oppressed people hopeless and helpless?
2. What motivates you to work with fervor for many hours?
3. Why does Ecclesiastes condemn people who are lazy?
4. In what ways does envy lead to a loss of companionship?
5. Who are the believers' companions?
6. Why should believers listen to wise advice and counsel?
7. Why do political solutions for society's problems fail?