

Only the Lonely

Or That's What The Lonely Is For

Ecclesiastes 4:1 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.

² And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive.

³ But better than both is he who has not yet been and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

⁴ 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.

⁵ The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.

⁶ Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

⁷ Again, I saw vanity under the sun:

⁸ 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.

⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.

¹⁰ 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!

¹¹ Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?

¹² And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him-- a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

¹³ Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice.

¹⁴ For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor.

¹⁵ I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that [second] youth who was to stand in the king's place.

¹⁶ 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.

(Ecclesiastes 4:1-16)

One: The Loneliest Number

The King sang, “Are you lonesome tonight? Do you miss me tonight? Are you sorry we drifted apart?”¹ That same year, his friend Roy Orbison sang, “There goes my baby. There goes my heart. They’re gone forever. So far apart. But only the lonely. Know why. I cry.”² It’s a common refrain in Country, Rock, and an entire genre named for it: The Blues. From James Taylor’s, “Don’t Let Me Be Lonely Tonight,” to Fogelberg’s “Lonely in Love,” Mellencamp’s, “Lonely Ol’ Night,” the Little River Band’s, “Lonesome Loser,” Hank William’s, “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” Three Dog Night’s, “One is the Loneliest Number,” REO Speedwagon’s, “One Lonely Night,” and

¹ Elvis Presley, “Are you Lonesome Tonight?” RCA Victor (1960). First recorded by Charles Hart, “Are You Lonesome To-night?” Harmony Records (1927).

² Roy Orbison, “Only the Lonely,” *Lonely and Blue*, RCA Victor (1960).

Yes' "Owner of Lonely Heart," their loneliness is usually about some girl they've lost or been pining over and can't have.

But not always.

The Cars video for their epic ballad "Drive" seems to be about the loneliness that occurs when you don't want to deal with the problems in your life, problems that can get so bad it seems like the girl in the video has been institutionalized.³ There won't be anyone to pick you up when you fall. Whitesnake's "Here I Go Again," tells of "a drifter, born to walk alone," on the "lonely street of dreams." "Here I go again on my own."⁴ It doesn't seem to be a state of being that he particularly likes, but it is where it is, so he tries to make the best of it. Lord Huron, whose music is like watching a Clint Eastwood Western sings of "land[ing] on an island coast where the only souls [he] sees are ghosts." He's been "dreaming again of a lonesome world Where I'm lost and I've got no friends. Just the rocks and the trees in my lonesome dreams And a road that don't never end."⁵ Also sung by Elvis and many others, and made more popular in a bit more recent times by the movie *O Brother, Where Art*

³ The Cars, "Drive," *Heartbeat City*, Elektra (1984).

⁴ Whitesnake, "Here I Go Again," *Saints & Sinners* (1982).

⁵ Lord Huron, "Lonesome Dreams," *Lonesome Dreams*, Lamsound (2012).

Thou? The Fairfield Four recorded the old gospel folk song, “Lonesome Valley,” which tells about the lonely walk that each and every one of us has to make to that valley of the shadow of death. “Nobody else can walk it for you.”⁶

In spite of how me and some of my friends sometimes joke about “*people*,” loneliness is truly one of the great of life. The Actress Anne Hathaway said, “Loneliness is my least favorite thing about life. The thing that I’m most worried about is just being alone without anybody to care for or someone who will care for me.” Tom Hanks is similar, “Everybody has something that chews them up and, for me, that thing was always loneliness.” Woody Allen, sounding like the Buddha philosophized, “Life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering – and it’s all over much too soon.” Whitney Houston, who I believe was killed by it put it simply, “Loneliness comes with life.” Claire Danes said, “Fame doesn’t end loneliness.” Joan Collins said, “Loneliness is the universal problem of rich people.” Albert Schweitzer said, “We are all so much together, but we are all dying of loneliness.” Mother Teresa said, “Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty.” Buffalo Bill said, “The West of the old times, with its strong

⁶ The Fairfield Four, “The Lonesome Valley,” *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Lost Highway/Mercury (2000).

characters, its stern battles and its tremendous stretches of loneliness, can never be blotted from my mind.”⁷ It doesn’t matter who you are. Rich or poor. Famous or anonymous. A man or a woman. A boy or a girl. Sometimes, we all feel lonely. Some people feel like that all the time. Some people *are* like that all the time.

Ecclesiastes 4:1-16 – Structure and Context

We are now a quarter of the way through Ecclesiastes. Beginning at the end of the ch. 3, we move into the second quarter by looking at **three themes**: **Evil** in society, **power**, and the **cult** (i.e. the religious system). These turn back in on themselves as we make our way through ch. 6.

A. Evil in Society (3:16-4:12)

B. Power (4:13-16)

C. Cult (4:17-5:6)

B'. Power (5:7-8)

A'. Poverty-Wealth (5:9-6:9)⁸

In Ecclesiastes 4, **evil in society and power** combine in a way that links them both together through this most

⁷ All quoted at “Loneliness Quotes,” BrainyQuote.com. <https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/loneliness-quotes>.

⁸ Naoto Kamano, *Cosmology and Character: Qoheleth’s Pedagogy from a Rhetorical-Critical Perspective*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 125.

depressing topic of **loneliness**. Last time we looked all the way through **Ecc 4:6**. So it would seem natural to continue this week by starting in **vs. 7**. Indeed, some see **4:7-16** as its own natural unit of thought.⁹ Others see **vv. 4-16** as a unit.¹⁰ But the more I thought about it, the more I said to myself that we really need to look at **the whole chapter** together. Indeed, we must even look back, again, into chapter 3, to truly figure out where this line of investigation into evil, power, and religion comes from, for it was that famous verse that God “**has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end**” (**Ecc 3:11**) that I believe forms the root that now branches off into the investigation of loneliness in ch. 4. We’ll see why that matters before we are finished.

How is the passage structured? We can divide it into **four different “I saw”** units, where each unit begins with that observation that the Preacher saw something. These match up with four “**under the sun**” comments, which fall in the same units: (*I saw*: **1, 4, 7, 15**; *under the sun*: **1, 3, 7, 15**).

⁹ For example, Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 107; **Tzemah Yoreh**, “Symmetrical Structures in the Writings; Ecclesiastes Symmetries English,” *Biblical Symmetries*, http://www.biblecriticism.com/symmetrical_structures.html. Also (though totally in Hebrew) **Tzemah Yoreh**, “Happiness, What is it Worth?” *Beit Mikra* 46 (2002): 353-370.

¹⁰ Cf. **Philip Graham Ryken**, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 109.

First he sees an injustice regarding oppressors and the oppressed (4:1-3). **Next** he sees the vanity of a man envying his neighbor (4-6). **Third**, he sees another vanity: a man working by himself, indeed, toiling for himself, with no son or brother (7-12). Finally, he sees a contrast between a poor, wise youth and a foolish old, king (13-16).

As we look at the units, we notice that the **first and last** have something in common while the **middle two** also share something in common. The first and last have **two parties**: oppressed and oppressor, poor and rich (king) or young and old, or wise and foolish). Kings were the chief oppressors in the ancient world, and so the two units seem related. The middle, while each having two parties, nevertheless deal with the **solitary individual**. One is the fool who “**folds his hands and eats his own flesh**,” while the other toils by himself. And thus, we can see a chiastic relationship along the lines of something like:

- A. Oppressed, oppressor (4:1-3)
- B. Hard worker who eats his own flesh (4-6)
- B'. Worker who toils for himself (7-12)
- A'. Poor, king (13-16)¹¹

¹¹ I did not see anyone doing this with the entire chapter, however, **Kamano** (p. 127) has this:

A. 4:7-8: Begins with “I saw;” “two/second,” “There is no end,” “This is also vanity.”

B. 4:9-12: Begins with “better,” clauses with “for.”

B'. 4:13-14: Begins with “better,” clauses with “for.”

But in all this, there is a tie that binds *all four* observations together. This is the idea of loneliness. In the first unit, neither the oppressed nor (possibly) the oppressor have anyone “to comfort them” (1). They are, in a word, alone. In the second unit, as we saw last time, the fool who is folding his hands and eating his own flesh is in fact the hard worker who is working for himself and not others. He is a miser, a hoarder, a selfish scrooge whose refusal to share what he has made with others has caused him to be shunned by his neighbor who has given him the evil eye. This evil eye becomes the cause of his wasting away (autophagy, self-cannibalism), a state of being that will not be changed until he sees the error of his ways. Thus, he too is alone. Probably, they both are. In the third unit, the similar hard worker (another point of contact) “has no other, either son or brother” (8). Again, he is alone. And his condition is so pitiable that it becomes the longest and most obvious reflection on this state of loneliness. Finally, you have an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to take advice (13). He likewise is alone, for even though he led many

A'. 4:15-16: Begins with “I saw;” “two,” “There is no end,” “This is also vanity.” See also RS, “Ecclesiastes 4:4-16,” *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* (April 26, 2015), <https://www.chiasmusxchange.com/2015/04/26/ecclesiastes-44-16/>. I think this one ultimately fails as the previous passage on the site does because the word choices are not reduced merely to the units they are found in the supposed chiasm. There’s too much ignoring of other data going on.

people during his reign, he listens to no one and no one rejoices over him (16).

In this way, we have four different kinds of situations that people find themselves in where loneliness reigns. And, in fact, it is possible to see the center of all this in vs. 10, “But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!”¹² Just like The Cars sang, “Whose gonna pick you up, when you fall.” Even unbelievers can see the misery of loneliness and want to help one another through it.

Oppression and Loneliness (4:1-3)

One of the most terrible forms of loneliness comes from the outside, imposed by someone else in the form of oppression. If you type “oppression” into Google, you get a plethora of woke social justice terms such as **exploitation** (using people’s labors to produce profit while not compensating them fairly), **marginalization** (confining a group of people to a lower social standing), **powerlessness** (some in a society are relegated to a position of powerlessness by the dominating ruling class), cultural **imperialism** (making the culture of the ruling class the social norm and defining all others are deviant and inferior), or **violence**

¹² See the structure by RS, n. 11.

(members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks).¹³

Each of these definitions takes a true wrong in this world and then **redefines a biblical way of viewing the injustice** perpetrated against the individual, by putting it in terms of group injustice using **Marxist categories** of stereotypes, forced redistribution, and “fairness.” The solution to the problem ends up solving nothing. In fact, it fosters more hatred and division amongst groups than there was to begin with as it simply changes the situation of outcomes (equity), for example by using an external power such as government to force the oppressor into become oppressed while it supposedly relieves the oppressed of its oppression by putting it into positions of power. This is not about individuals, but groups (such as skin color, sexual orientation, and so on).

Those who think this is a good idea have not stopped to consider the **possible** paradox of our passage that we looked at last time. Yes, it is true that it is horrible being oppressed. Notice that oppression generates “**tears of the oppressed**” (**Ecc 4:1**). I think we all naturally and instinctively

¹³ This was simply the first thing that came up in my search: **Caroline González-Scott**, “Tools for Social Change: The Five Faces of Oppression,” Leadership for Educational Equity, <https://educationalequity.org/blog/tools-social-change-five-faces-oppression>.

understand why. Obviously, or a student being humiliated by a teacher, or a slave being whipped by a master, or a child being manhandled physically or sexually by an adult, or many other forms of oppression on the individual level **generates many tears**. And as the Preacher says, “**they had no one to comfort them!**” They are alone in their suffering. This can also happen on a group level. “**By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion**” (Ps 137:1).

But what these social justice warriors have not stopped to consider is how at the end of the day, once they have turned the tables on the oppressor, reversing the roles, getting their payback for all the wrongs done to them (or, often not them, but their “group” that they are politically aligning themselves with), now that they are in the position of power, now that they are able to become the oppressor, they have not escaped the problem. For as it says, “**On the side of the oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them.**”

Power and Loneliness (4:13-16)

Rather than go in order, I thought it would be interesting to **compare this first observation to the last one**,

since they seem to be related. “Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice” (Ecc 4:13). You can see that it contrasts **two opposites**. You have a poor but wise youth vs. an old and foolish king. Wise vs. foolish makes sense. Young vs. old makes sense. But why a poor vs. a king? Why not a peasant vs. a king or the poor vs. the rich? **It may be because it has the first observation in mind** (if so, it reinforces the possible, though granted grammatically unlikely idea from the first example that the oppressors are alone). Kings were the chief oppressors of the ancient world, because they had the power to do anything they wanted. And with much power comes much corruption.

In this case, the king has grown old and has become a fool because **he no longer knew how to take advice**. Proverbs has much to say about this:

**For a lack of guidance a nation falls,
but many advisers make victory sure. (Prov 11:14)**

**Plans fail for lack of counsel,
but with many advisers they succeed. (Prov 15:22)**

**Make plans by seeking advice;
if you wage war, obtain guidance. (Prov 20:18)**

**For waging war you need guidance,
and for victory many advisers. (Prov 24:6)**

Longman says, “One important point of these references is that failure to seek and follow advice dooms royal ventures to failure. That is why ignoring advice is a mark of a fool.”¹⁴

Going again to [Solomon's life](#), we can see how we went astray after much money, fame, power, and women. He clearly did not take Moses's advice, which was actually God's advice, which was actually God's *law* that the king must not seek such things ([Deut 17:14-20](#)). Even with wisdom driving him, he was becoming the fool, because he would not listen to God. This idea of not taking advice is even more pronounced in the story of his son [Rehoboam](#), who at the beginning of his reign was actually given the opportunity to be a wise king. But when he asked if he should lighten the load and burden of the oppression of the people put on them by Solomon, when his old counselors said yes, then he would be forever loved by all, Rehoboam sought out the council of younger men, who said that he should multiply their oppression and make life absolutely miserable for everyone but those in his court ([1Kg 12:2-11](#)). He took their advice, split the kingdom, and died a despised king. It seems that [power](#) had gotten to the king. This king is utterly alone because of his foolishness.

¹⁴ [Tremper Longman](#), *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 145–146.

Ecc 4:14 now says, “For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor.” It is possible that this refers to **the king**, that he went from rags to riches. However, it is also possible that this refers to **the youth**. In fact, this verse reminds many of **Joseph**, a boy who had little when he was born, was sold into slavery by his brothers, went to prison because of Potiphar’s wife, and then virtually ascended to the throne of Egypt, becoming second only to the Pharaoh. Of course, it isn’t an exact match. But the idea that another comes along who is wiser than the king does match Joseph, and along with Rehoboam, the two can serve as analogies for what is going on here.

In this observation, we have the only one of the four that does not begin with “I saw.” In this case, “**I saw**” comes in the third verse (**vs. 15**). “*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*” (**15-16**). This vision was set up by the circumstances of the previous pair of opposites. But there is a question here. **Who is in mind** in vs. 15? The ESV leaves a word **untranslated**. It

is a word we see earlier in the chapter, which we will come to soon enough. It is the word “second” (*sheni*), literally, “along with that *second* youth...” The question is, who is this second youth? While it isn’t possible to answer definitively, just like it isn’t possible to know for sure whether it was the king or the poor wise youth who went from prison to the throne, I take it that “second” refers to the position not the person. That is, there is only one youth in this observation, not two and this youth rose all the way to **second in command** and then, when the fool dies, he becomes king. This seems to be the ESV’s take, which is why it doesn’t translate the word, making it clear (in its interpretation) that there is only one youth.

In this way of reading, the focus on **loneliness** remains central. This is seen in the last verse, “**There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him**” (16). He was a foolish and wicked king. He probably oppressed many people. He was **alone in his oppression**, and he is **alone on his throne**. Though throngs of people were in his kingdom, no one cared about him, no one loved him, no one rejoiced in his life. When he died, no one missed him. This brings cohesion to what otherwise seems to be an out of place observation that really

has nothing to do with what comes before or after. And the point I want to make here is that it doesn't matter what kind of power you might gain for yourself in this life, it can't stop the loneliness, especially when it is used for foolish ends.

Miserliness and Loneliness (4:4-6).

Let's go up to [the second observation](#). We also looked at this one last time, so we let's look at it from [this new perspective](#). To recap, there are two people in mind, the worker and the neighbor. “[Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor](#)” (4). I suggested that what is going on in here is *not* that the neighbor starts to work hard out of envy like a fool to keep up with the Jones' (per the ESV), [but rather](#) to that the fool is the hardworking man who is working only for himself, and this causes the neighbor to first envy and then only get angry, giving the worker the evil eye, because he is so selfish with his stuff.

This then explains [vs. 5](#). “[The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh](#).” That is, the worker—who is the fool—is embracing himself. This self-embrace brings about the evil eye, which in turn causes the foolish worker to waste away in a form of autophagy—self cannibalization. The key is this [self-embrace](#). The only person who loves him is himself. He

has no one else, because he doesn't care about anyone else. He is a miser, a scrooge, and in this **his loneliness is self-inflicted**.

Vs. 6 brings out this theme even more. “**Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.**” **Quietness** comes from “**a handful**” [one] which is literally **an open/flat hand**. That is, when he becomes generous, the evil eye is taken back and peace exists now between the two. But if stinginess continues, strife and contention are the sure and certain result, which is a striving after wind. This is contrasted with the word “**two**” (*shenayim*), related to “second” (*sheni*). “Two” appears in **vs. 3**, “**But better than both [literally “two”]...**” where it was two people. It will appear again in later verses. Here is it **two hands** [*hopen*, often “fists”] **... fighting**. This creates **loneliness for both parties**. That's what sin always does, for it is by its very nature a separation, be it from good, from the law, from God, or from one another.

True Loneliness (4:7-12)

This is brought to the forefront in **the third** (our last) of the four pairings, which also happens to be **the longest**. “**Again, I saw vanity under the sun:**” (7). What is the vanity this time? “**One person who has no other, either son or**

brother” (8a). This is *truly* the man who is alone. He has no one. No family. No siblings. No children. One thinks of the orphan or the widow or the only child or the divorcee or the person ripped from their family, kidnapped, stolen. Or perhaps it is even just his own choice. He leaves everyone he loves. Any of these. All of these.

This person now becomes like the man in vs. 3—a worker, thus giving us the main parallel. “Yet there is no end to all his toil” (8b). So he works and works, he toils away, day and night, month after month, year after year. But now look. “And his eyes are never satisfied with riches” (8c). In this way, he is also very similar to the man in vs. 3-4, the man who just works to get stuff for himself, never sharing his wealth with anyone. In this case, it is more obvious, for he is insatiable in his lust for money.

This in turn causes him to become blind to the theme of our passage. “He never asks, ‘For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?’” (8d). The man in mind is consumed with, as Fogelberg poetically put it, “The Power of Gold.” “The story is told of the power of gold and its lure on the unsuspecting. It glitters and shines. It badgers and blinds. And constantly needs protecting. Balance the cost of the soul you lost with the dreams you lightly sold. Are you

under the power of gold?”¹⁵ In Dan’s song, he actually enjoys the rewards of his labor. “The women are lovely, the wine is superb. [Yet] there’s something about the song that disturbs you (repeat x7).” For the preacher, the worker doesn’t even care about pleasure, that’s how consumed he is with the gold. He calls this “vanity and an unhappy business” (8e). Indeed!

As the Preacher sees this evil, he begins to reflect on what is in fact the central message of my sermon, and I think of his entire chapter. It comes in the form of a proverb. “Two are better than one...” (9). There’s that number two again. It is not directly contrasted with one. Why are two better? You could think of many reasons, but here the inspired Scripture gives you four to think on. First, “because they have a good reward for their toil” (9b). What does this mean? The context is both labor and, along with the second observation, miserliness. And so, “The good reward consists in this, that each one of the two has the pleasant consciousness of doing good to the other by his labour, and especially of being helpful to him. In this latter general sense is grounded the idea of the reward of faithful fellowship.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Dan Fogelberg, “The Power of Gold,” *Twin Sons of Different Mothers*, Full Moon, Epic (1978).

¹⁶ Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 6 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 698.

The Preacher continues. “For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow” (10). This is a second way in which two are better than one. It may refer to traveling on a journey. Or, it may be taken metaphorically. The point is clear as is seen by the inverse parallel, “But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up.” “Whose gonna’ pick you up, when you fall?” The preacher cries out a howling cry upon such a person. “Woe!” How terrible to be in that situation!

The third example now comes to us. “Again, if two lie together, they keep warm” (11). The Targum reads this the way many of us might—marital companionship, whether it be physical intimacy or simply proximity. It might also be understood as the second of three examples that are all related to a journey. Thus, it might be that two companions are travelling together, and it gets very cold, and so they can warm one another up with their body heat. High mountain rescues where exposure is an issue is a great example. The rescuer saves the frostbitten person, but the only immediate relief is to warm them up as quickly as possible.

The fourth example may also be related to the journey. “And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him” (12a). Longman gives the

background, “The last example also finds its most natural setting during a journey. The roads in the ancient Near East were often hazardous as one traveled beyond the effective control of towns and cities. A lone traveler, according to Qohelet, was easy prey of robbers, while two could provide resistance and aid to one another.”¹⁷

In this way, our entire chapter has given **example after example**, through a series of observations about and evil and power, about one and two, how this world is a **lonely** place. It doesn't seem to matter if one is oppressed or an oppressor, powerful or powerless, rich or poor, king or peasant, young or old, in plenty or in need, loneliness can strike at any time. And this can be every bit as pitiable and terrible as the person who truly is alone in this world, with nothing but themselves to drive them home. If you are lonely, know that you are *not* alone! How ironic.

That's What the Lonely is For

With that song by the Cars and its allusion(s) to Ecclesiastes here in my mind, **I want to address those of you who feel lonely** and those of you **who are lonely**. Because of what I said earlier, this can be all of us from time to time.

¹⁷ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 142–143.

For some, they are in a condition of loneliness that they just can't ever seem to get out of. For some, it is self-imposed. They do things to exacerbate their own loneliness. For some, it isn't and they don't. Whatever the case, it is a serious problem that we've seen leads the Preacher to pronounce woe and conclude vanity.

If loneliness is a problem, can it be solved? Yes, and it might even come from our passage, though it certainly comes from the previous chapter to which it is related. The first step, as it is with any problem, is to **acknowledge it**. You don't acknowledge it, you can't deal with it. You must acknowledge that you are lonely. The song's refrain says, **"You can't go on thinking nothing's wrong, so whose gonna drive you home tonight?"** Imagine a drunk driver, so sloshed he can't even touch his nose with his finger. But he gets behind the wheel anyway. Halfway home, he crashes, killing himself and some unfortunate souls in the other vehicle. The stakes of being lonely are in fact nothing short of this. How many people have committed suicide from it? How many others have gone on killing sprees?

Is loneliness a sin? It can be, if it causes you to worship yourself. It can be for other reasons as well. But even if it is just **the never-ending sadness** that fuels other feelings such

as worthlessness, unimportance, self-pity, a strange desire to only want to isolate yourself more (all of which are often sinful themselves), the first step is to recognize it for what it is. You might be in a sad [widow](#) who spends all her time looking at the windows and walls. You might be in [a house full of siblings](#) with loving parents, always around people, going to church weekly, keeping fairly busy with life, and yet still feel utterly alone. Maybe this is keeping you from [deepening your relationship](#) with God. Perhaps it is [keeping you from God altogether](#). Maybe you even blame him for it!

Since I've been giving you so many lyrics from so many songs lately, I wanted to add a big one to the list here. It is a series of songs by folk singer David Wilcox that each deal directly with the lonely. And the words are powerful. In the first he asks [what the lonely is for?](#) What do you mean, what it is for? Well, he thinks it is given to each of us for a very good reason. It is given to us to make us look at what [loneliness itself presupposes](#).

*Picture your hope, your heart's desire
As a castle that you must keep
In all of its splendor, it's drafty with lonely
This heart is too hard to heat*

*But when I get lonely, that's only a sign
Some room is empty that room is there by design
If I feel hollow, that's just my proof that there's more for me to follow
That's what the lonely is for.*

*You can seal up the pain
Build walls in the hallways
Close off a small room to live in
But those walls will remain
And keep you there always
And you'll never know why you were given the lonely¹⁸*

Why we were given the lonely? *Given to us?* Yes, given to us. We were given loneliness to teach us that by ourselves we are not enough. Loneliness presupposes that *relationship* is more basic. That seems backwards. Shouldn't being alone be more basic? No. God made Adam and found that he needed a helper.

And yet, even with others, we are not enough. In a second song on the same album, he likens each of us to a cup. Some love to pour themselves out until they are empty, filling *others* up, but have no time for themselves. Most love to have others pour themselves *into us* until *they* are empty.

¹⁸ David Wilcox, "That's What The Lonely Is For," *Big Horizon*, A&M (1994).

But we *all are broken cups* (we all sin). We unable to hold much water for long enough to fill even ourselves up. But if we go to [the Waterfall](#), that is to God, we will always be full of water, even though there's a break in the cup that holds love inside us all.¹⁹

In still a third song he, he sings about the hopelessness of life and yet the hope that is right there in the middle of it.

You say you see no hope?

*You say you see no reason we should dream That the world would ever
change*

You say the love is foolish to believe

*'Cause they'll always be some crazy With an army or a knife
To wake you from your daydream Put the fear back in your life*

Look

*If someone wrote a play Just to glorify what's stronger than hate
Would they not arrange the stage To look as if the hero came too late?*

He's almost in defeat

It's looking like the evil side will when

So on the edge of every seat

From the moment that the whole thing begins

It is love who mixed the mortar

And it's love who stacked these stones

And it's love who made the stage here

¹⁹ [David Wilcox](#), "Break in the Cup," *Big Horizon*, A&M (1994).

*Although it looks like we're alone
In this scene, set in shadows,
Like the night is here to stay
There is evil cast around us
But it's love that wrote the play
For in this darkness love can show the way*

*Now the stage is set
You can feel your own heart beating in your chest
This life's not over yet
So we get up on our feet and do our best
We play against the fear
We play against the reasons not to try
We're playing for the tears
Burning in the happy angel's eyes
For it's love who mixed the mortar
And it's love who stacked these stones
And it's love who made the stage here
Though it looks like we're alone
In this scene, set in shadows,
Like the night is here to stay
There is evil cast around us
But it's love that wrote the play
For in this darkness love will show the way²⁰*

²⁰ David Wilcox, "Show the Way," *Big Horizon*, A&M (1994).

Darkness. We saw that way back in **3:11**. This is our tie-in to the previous chapter. God “has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put *darkness* into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” Though he is not mentioned by name, this same God is not far from us through ch. 4. Someone explains how in the first three verses, it is quite possible, especially reading with **Job**, that the one who brings oppression can sometimes be God himself. Job feels oppressed by God (**Job 10:3**).²¹ With Job, God permitted the oppression, indeed oversaw it through Satan, in order to bring Job to the end of himself.

The Targum on **Ecc 4:9-10** is another example. Here, it is not two men but two “*righteous men*” that are better than one. Together, *they* have a good reward in the world to come because they labored to support their generation. The one who falls, falls because of sickness. The one who raises, raises him in prayer. Indeed, in vs. 13, “**Better is Abraham who was a poor boy, but had in him the spirit of wisdom from the Lord and whose Master [Creator] became known to him when he was three years old and did not want to worship idols than the wicked Nimrod who was an old and**

²¹ **Thomas Krüger.** *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, Library of Biblical Studies, ed. Katharine Dell and Will Kynes (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 95-96

foolish king.” The point is simply, there is something throughout this chapter that is driving us beyond the loneliness itself, to something far greater.

This takes me to the very last part of ch. 4 that we have not discussed. Maybe you thought I forgot it? “A threefold cord is not quickly broken” (Ecc 4:12b). Good commentaries recognize here an obvious link throughout this section with the old Sumerian *Gilgamesh Epic*. The fascinating story has Gilgamesh (2/3 god, 1/3 man) going out on a mission with his trusted friend Enkidu (half-man, half beast). Enkidu is about to give up a mission, but Gilgamesh tells him, “Stop, Enkidu! The second man will not die. The boat-in-tow will not sink. No man will cut the three-ply cord.”²² The point would be to draw upon a well-known story in order, like Solomon and Rehoboam or Abraham or Nimrod to make the metaphor more concrete.

But what most modern commentaries do not like is interpreting such things spiritually. They want a one-to-one, very naturalistic way of reading. They look to the literalistic level, such things as a tying together weaker strands or cord, creating a stronger cord, and then applying

²² Aaron Shaffer, “The Mesopotamian Background of Qoh 4:9–12” (in Hebrew), *Eretz Israel* 8 (1967): 246–50; and “New Information on the Origin of the ‘Threefold Cord’” (in Hebrew), *Eretz Israel* 9 (1969): 159–60.

it directly to the topic at hand. For example, “The point of the image of the three-strand cord is rather that strength can be gained through human relationships.”²³ And, of course, this is true.

But this isn't the only way the Church Fathers read it.²⁴ They often looked to the spiritual. For example, Ambrose said, “And that you may understand it to be said as a mystery and not in reference to the bare number *that two are better than one*, he adds a mystical saying, *A threefold cord is not quickly broken*. For that which is threefold and uncompounded cannot be broken. Thus the Trinity, being of an uncompounded nature, cannot be dissolved; for God is, whatever He is, one and simple and uncompounded; and what He is that He continues to be, and is not brought into subjection.” (Ambrose, *Letter 81.8*).²⁵ Gregory the Great said, “By a ‘cord,’ faith is expressed, as Solomon witnesses, who says, ‘A threefold cord is not easily broken’ because the

²³ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 143–144.

²⁴ Of course, it wasn't only read this way. For a summary see Krzysztof Bardski, “The Snowball and the Cord of Three Strands: Qoh 4:12b in the Rabbinic Tradition,” *Essays Offered to Honor Prof. Maurice Gilbert, SJ on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Nuria Calduch-Benages (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 163. For more detailed examples see Krzysztof Bardski, “A Word Through the Eyes of the Dove 7,” <http://pracownicy.uksw.edu.pl/pracownicy.uksw.edu.pl/KrzysztofBardski/publikacje/slowo-oczyna-golebicy-2/slowo-oczyna-golebicy-7/>. You must right click the page in Chrome and translate it into English. This appears to be very similar to his article Krzysztof Bardski, “Trzykrotnie zapleciony sznur Eklezjastesa (Koh 4, 12b) i jego symbolika w tradycji Izraela i Kościoła,” *^3* (1999) 5–44, which I cannot find online.

²⁵ See also Jerome, Basil, Gregory, and others as cited in Bardski, “A word,” Jarick, and others.

faith in truth that is woven by the mouth of preachers from the knowledge of the Trinity remains firm in the elect. It is broken only in the heart of the reprobate” (Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job* 6.33.18).

You will read modern commentators calling these “forced Christological interpretations.” Moderns don’t like this. But as Bardski writes, the origin of this saying is probably Middle Eastern wisdom traditions and so from a literary point of view and the context of Ecclesiastes, “The motif of the cord of three strands acts as a symbol inviting the reader to connect it with situations in his or her life.”²⁶ In other words, it is poetic for precisely the reason that it can be applied spiritually!

And why wouldn’t you? God is the original “Three and One.” He is the eternally unlonely triune God! He predates all analogies and therefore it is only proper that such analogies first point, not to our situation, but to his! The one and three mystery points you to the Triune God who has put eternity in our hearts so that we might in fact look at loneliness that he also puts into our lives *and seek him*. Of course, none of us do seek him, not until we hear the good news which is his power to save whom he wishes. And when

²⁶ Bardsky, “Snowball,” 157.

his people hear the good news, they believe him that he fills that loneliness in a way that no other being should or can. That's what the loneliness is for! Have you heard him telling you this today?

C. S. Lewis said, “Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ, and you will find Him, and with Him everything else is thrown in.” Josh McDowell said, “While the resurrection promises us a new and perfect life in the future, God loves us too much to leave us alone to contend with the pain, guilt, and loneliness of our present life.”²⁷

The promise of the Gospel hits squarely at the lack of comfort experienced by the very first lonely person in our passage: Those who have no one to comfort them. Whether that lack of comfort be from circumstances outside of you or from your own sin, which is itself a separation from God and therefore by definition a loneliness, it does not matter. It is into this hopeless condition that the Gospel says, “*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned*” (Isa 40:1-2). The Gospel tell you

²⁷ Both quotes come from the same webpage with the famous celebrity quotes above.

that this pardon comes through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who gave himself over to **the ultimate loneliness**, when he was forsaken of his eternal fellowship with his God on the cross, so that those who believe might know what it is **never to be lonely again**. That's a story worth telling. Even more, it is a story worth believing.

Loneliness is a horrible curse, just like some of our celebrities have come to realize. It is better to be with others than without them. But even “them,” if they are humans, will fail us and bring about inevitable loneliness that is caused by theirs and our own sin. **God never fails us, and he never leaves or forsakes those who are in Christ, whom he calls to himself**. Two and three are strong together, but the one who knows God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is infinitely stronger, having been given a fellowship with the Creator himself that will never be lost or forgotten. **“It is not good that man should be alone,”** God says. If you trust in the Lord Jesus, you never will be. And, you will always know that truth, even if you sometimes suppress it in remaining sin. What glorious news.

Come to him and know eternal love and fellowship, and then even in the futility of this life and its inevitable temporal loneliness, taste and see that you are truly never

alone when Christ dwells within you. Otherwise, know that this nagging, depressing emptiness you feel will never be taken away until you do.

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