



# HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

**Life Together**

**February 7, 2021**

**Ecclesiastes 4:1-12**

**Clint Pressley**

*4 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. <sup>2</sup>And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. <sup>3</sup>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: <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>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! <sup>11</sup>Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? <sup>12</sup>And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.*

*(Pastor prays)*

There are no easy answers in life. Some of you know this all too well. More times than not, when we walk through profoundly painful times, we have more questions than we do answers. The chirpy bumper sticker Christianity that people love so much because it requires so little, it disintegrates when it's faced with an infertility, miscarriage, an overdose, a painful divorce or a sudden death. And when that happens, if you are not anchored in Christ, you can easily find yourself paralyzed or in a free fall, or worse, in a hole that you can't get out of.

Debilitating pain without Christ in His church can be overwhelming and relentless. You wake up with it. You go to bed with it. You live in it. It feels like that's where the preacher is in Chapter 4. There is very little sunlight here, but there is hope. I actually love this chapter because it gives us the freedom to be real without being judged, the freedom to question without being in despair, and it exposes and displays our need for Christ and the special community called the church. I hope you'll see, today, that ...

### **Christ has called us to be in community, and that community is the church**

I'm going to need you to stay with me today because this sermon starts out dark. But it ends in the hope and love of Christ. Let's start with the first dark point and look at the misery.

### **A comfortless life is miserable**

Look what the preacher says in verse 1. *4 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.* Oppression and the tears of the oppressed. Here is the picture of people who are mistreated and hurt and beaten up. They are looked down on, even held down, and done so by people in power. And the ones in power have the ability to help and yet they aren't doing anything. I mean here is the whole story of God's people from Abel being killed by Cain to Joseph being thwarted by his brothers to the Israelites being enslaved by the Egyptians to the terrible leaders in Judges and the oppressive pagan kings to the Babylonian exile to the crucifixion of Jesus to the persecution of Christians to the burning of the reformers to the day we live in now and the coming estrangement and stripping of rights that Bible-believing Christians will eventually face.

And look. Look how it made the pastor feel in verses 2-3. *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.* It would be better to be dead or to never be born than to live like this.

Have you ever felt like that? “I should just end it. I hate my life so much that I wish I had never been born!” What's interesting to me is here is Solomon the King! It's encouraging that he's at least bothered by the suffering he saw around him. Listen, we live in a bad and tough and painful world. We can't get so hardened that we don't have shock and grief over sin and compassion for people who hurt. These verses distill every problem down to its one root problem: sin. Sin makes the world a tragedy. Sin makes life seem unbearable. In this text, sin makes suicide look courageous.

This is why the Gospel of Jesus Christ is so glorious, the forgiveness of all sin and the foundation of all hope. In verses 1-2, two times the preacher says there's no one to comfort them. But that's just it. There *is*, there *is* someone. In Isaiah 40, God calls out, “Comfort, comfort my people!” Seven hundred years later in Luke 4, Jesus says, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach “good news.” The good news is the Gospel and finds its root at the cross.

That's where we run, to the cross of Jesus. I take you there this morning because there are going to be times when only the consolation of Israel, only Jesus will suffice. So bring that pain and burden and hurt to the cross. Because a comfortless life is miserable. Let me show you something else that's miserable.

### **A worldly life is miserable**

Look what the preacher uncovers in verse 4. The main motivation for work is dominance. <sup>4</sup> *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.* It's man's envy of his neighbor. Here is this twisted value system of the world that has you a slave to work so you can have more and better than those around you. And I would say that most of us have at least a touch of this in some capacity. Unless you're the lazy, no account, good for nothing in verse 5. Maybe you're not materialistic. Maybe yours shows up in your competitive nature or the need for the last word or to win an argument. It's the desire to have something that's uniquely yours, something that others don't have. Maybe it's your appearance, your clothes, the car you drive. Maybe it's your strength or

athleticism. There is nothing wrong with any of these things but what's underneath. What's the motivation? There is one way to test this. How do you feel when someone is better than you? How do you feel when someone is richer, better liked, in better shape? Can you celebrate the common grace in that person? The preacher says in verse 4 to burn yourself out being better than others is spitting in the wind. And I'll just add that it's anti-Gospel and nothing like the Lord Jesus. Now the solution is not just to quit. That's the guy in verse five. That's the guy who sits down and says, "I'm not doing anything" and comes to ruin. No that's not the solution. Instead we see that in verse 6. We find a way. You find a way to choke it back and balance it out for the glory of God so that whatever your hand finds to do, you can do it with all your might and do it unto the Lord. Now if the comfortless life is miserable and the worldly life is miserable, then this third one is really bad.

### **The greedy life is miserable**

We won't spend much time here but it's worth taking a look at this guy in verses 7-8. Here is a man or a woman who isn't really connected to anyone or, if he is, he hasn't considered that person. All he does is work. And through all his achievements, although he's profitable, he's never satisfied. Here is the Ebenezer Scrooge of the Old Testament. This is what happens when you *use* people and *love* things. And at the end of verse 8, the preacher says it's vanity, *haval*. You think you're building something, but it's a mouthful of ashes. Now we've spent the last little bit walking through a depressing passage. A comfortless life is miserable. Worldly life is miserable. Greedy life is miserable. Now I want to end with the hope because verses 9-12 have a beautiful picture of being in community, and I want to persuade you with these verses from the Old Testament. I want to persuade you as to why, as a Christian, you need to actively pursue community in the church. Comfortless is miserable. Worldly is miserable. Greedy is miserable.

### **Life in community is better**

Let's take this Old Testament passage and display a New Testament truth, because the world is broken and we need each other desperately. Here are some happy alternatives to The Lone Ranger life. Verse 9 says that we can do more together. Pleasures in life are better enjoyed in community. The burdens of life are better handled in Christian friendship. Who are you talking

to, praying for and investing in? You will get more done in community. I was in Lumberton last week with a mission team of 10 people and it was a picture of Christian community.

### **We last longer together**

This verse is a proverb and it looks beyond the physical dangers and into spiritual falls. There are slips of judgment, sins, hurt, misery, depression and temptations. Why aren't you stepping in when you see a brother or sister in trouble and pick a brother up when he falls? You need to hold him in accountability and help in his restoration. This is working to heal the deep places. This is knowing someone and being known and bringing them with you. Don't wait on a community. Create it, establish it and seek it out.

### **We can get through winter together**

Verse 11 is used in marriages and that's appropriate. Connie cross-stitched it for me. <sup>11</sup>*Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?* <sup>12</sup>*And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.* It seems weird to us but this described travelers ending up at an end of a journey, and sleeping pretty close together. Again it is a proverb that can be extended to have a spiritual force. It's winter and there's a coldness. Look, when winter comes for you, no matter how dark and cold it gets in your heart, in life, being truly known by Christian brothers and sisters is going to give you enough warmth to get you through.

### **We are safer together**

There is safety in numbers and this is not just you being smart when you are in a parking garage. This is you with the redeemed people who walk beside you, pray for you, listen to you and point you to the Gospel. "Where two or three are gathered, I am there." "A threefold cord is not quickly broken." Jesus, the righteous savior dying on the cross in the place of sinners, raised from the dead, and the one thing He established upon His ascension was the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. He's called us to be in community. That community is the church. Life without it is miserable. In Christ we are better together. Love the church. Pray for the church and be patient. And let your work be for the glory of God.

*(Pastor prays)*