

6.

**IV. HARD WORK IS VANITY**  
**Ecclesiastes 2:18-4:16**

**Introduction: I hate all the labor on which I have labored under the sun (2:18).**

A fourth topic that Solomon had found to be vanity was hard work. Solomon certainly had worked hard during all of his reign. He would not have been able to achieve all of the spectacular accomplishments that his reign produced without working long hours with great energy, yet all of that hard work and all it had accomplished left him empty when he was writing this book in his old age..

He said he had come to hate all the labor that had been required to produce his construction projects, his wise decisions, his great wealth, and his lavish entertainments. Those achievements had not come easily. They had consumed his whole life, but now they left him unsatisfied, discontent, even lonely in the midst of a nation of people. He was aware he could have spent his time and his labors in more meaningful ways. So he hated a

lifetime of labors that he had thrown away on works that did not satisfy.

Solomon shows that he felt especially strongly about this vanity in his life. He had spent 35 verses on the first three topics that he found to be vanity. He spent 46 verses on this one topic. The reason he felt so strongly about this topic was that it had been the major emphasis of his life. Now it was the major disappointment of his life. Since he felt so strongly about it, he wanted to explain it fully. He was eager for people to understand the folly of spending life on hard work and neglecting other emphases that are more important.

Solomon gave four reasons for concluding that his hard work had not produced anything that was truly meaningful to him at the end of his life. He developed those reasons one by one.

- A. *Because I must leave it to the man who will come after me (2:18-21).*
  1. *And who knows whether he will be a wise one or a fool (2:19)?*
    - a. *Yet he will control over all my labor on which I labored and in which I was wise under the sun (2:19b).*
    - b. *This also is vanity (2:19c).*
  2. *So I turned to cause my heart to despair over all the labor on which I have labored under the sun (2:20-21).*
    - a. *Because so often a man must give that on which he labored with wisdom and with knowledge and with skill as an inheritance to a man who did not labor for it (2:21a).*
    - b. *This also is vanity and a great evil (2:21b).*
  3. *And what comes to the man from all his labor and from the struggles of his mind over which he troubled under the sun (2:22-23)?*
    - a. *Because all his days [were] pain and his occupation frustration (2:23a).*
    - b. *Even at night his mind did not rest (2:23b).*
    - c. *This also is vanity (2:23c).*

**The first reason Solomon gave for concluding that his hard work was vanity was that he had to die and leave everything to someone else.** We may want to ask why Solomon did not find that prospect to be pleasant and satisfying. He could have rejoiced that his work was going to make it possible for someone else to have an easier life. He did not feel that way, and he took time to explain clearly why. He explained it in three ways.

**Verse 2:19. I do not know if the one who will inherit my possessions will be wise or foolish.** The first explanation Solomon gave for feeling it was vanity to turn the results of his hard work over to someone else was that he did not know if his heir was going to be a wise person or a fool. He felt that if he could be sure he was going to leave all his possessions to someone who was going to make wise use of them, he would feel good about what he had done. However, if he left all the results of his labors to a foolish man, that person would abuse, squander, neglect, and eventually destroy all he had accomplished. It was frightening, even maddening for him to know he was going to give control over all his life's work to someone without knowing what that person would do with it.

That statement was tragically sad. Solomon knew well who his heir was going to be. His oldest son was going to succeed him on the throne, and that son was going to gain control over Solomon's estate, government, and nation. Why did he feel so insecure about leaving his work and treasures to his son? The reason is he had spent so much energy on building his estate and on gathering his possessions that he had not taken any time to help his son build his life. Actually, he did not even know his son; and, therefore, he had no idea what his son was going to do with the nation and with his wealth when he was gone.

Do not think that statement is too harsh a judgment on Solomon. Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. We do not know how many sons he had, but they must have been many. He could not possibly have had time for so many sons in the midst of his many other responsibilities and activities. The record of Solomon's life indicates that he did not even take time for one of his many sons.

In the record of Solomon's reign that is recorded in both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, strong mention is made of his aggressive dealings with his opponents, with his business dealings with the king of Tyre, and with his diplomacy with the queen of Sheba. We read about his impressive public ceremonies and his great efforts to please his wives by constructing temples for them. But we do not read one word about his relationship with his sons or about his training them for leadership. They were just ornaments with which he decorated his life. Now in his old age, he suddenly was aware he had neglected the greatest treasure he had, and it was too late to do anything about it.

The fact is that, right after Solomon's death, Solomon's son Rehoboam started out by being a foolish king. He received a reasonable request from the men of his nation for lower taxes and less drafted labor, because the people were exhausted from the heavy burdens Solomon had put on them. Rehoboam received good counsel from elder statesmen in the land, who urged him to comply with the request of his people. Instead he listened to inexperienced young men who had grown up with him, and in compliance with their advice he responded to the people with force and threat. He told them he was not going to expect less of them. Instead he was going to demand more. As a result, the northern ten tribes of the nation rebelled and never again were reconciled with Solomon's tribe of Judah until they were carried into captivity by Assyria (1 Kings 12:1-20; 2 Chron. 10:19).

Solomon must have been expecting just such consequences when he was writing Ecclesiastes, because he knew he had not prepared Rehoboam for the responsibilities he was going to assume. Solomon said he wasn't sure whether his heir was going to be wise or foolish, but he must have thought it was most likely that his son would act foolishly. If he was expecting such developments, it is easy to understand why he thought leaving all the results of his work to his heir and son was nothing but vanity.

To Rehoboam's credit, he learned from his tragic initial mistake and listened to good advice from Jehovah's prophet about how to respond to the

rebellion, and that time listening to the right advice saved him from a debilitating and hopeless war (1 Kings 12:21-24; 2 Chronicles 10:1-19). Afterward, Rehoboam's record was a mixture of wise fiscal policies (2 Chron. 11:1-17) and disastrous spiritual policies (1 Kings 14:21-28). The most instructive information that the Scriptures give concerning Rehoboam's reign is what they say about his relationships with his sons. 1 Chronicles 11:22 (HCSB) says,

*<sup>22</sup> Rehoboam appointed Abijah son of Maacah as chief leader among his brothers, intending to make him king. <sup>23</sup> Rehoboam also showed discernment by dispensing some of his sons to all the regions of Judah and Benjamin and to all the fortified cities. He gave them plenty of possessions and sought many wives for them."*

Could it be that Rehoboam gave so much attention to his sons just because he had not received that kind of provision and training from his father Solomon?

So Solomon's dismay over the prospect of what the man who came after him was going to do with all his possessions and accomplishments was well founded. He knew it as the time of his departure drew near and as he sat down to write the Book of Ecclesiastes. He obviously wanted to warn other men against making the mistake he had made. He knew well that other men had the same drive to succeed that he had had, and he wanted to warn them about the danger of carrying that drive too far. He was willing to open his heart and share his inner agony in the hope that some younger men would learn from his mistake and not put all their emphasis on their work and their worldly success. He wanted them to be inspired to take time for their sons and to prepare their sons for the responsibilities they were going to assume when their fathers were gone.

**Verses 2:20-21. I must leave my possessions to one who did not work for them.** Solomon's second explanation of why he felt it was vanity to leave his life's work and accomplishments to someone else was that they were going to be possessed and controlled by someone who had not worked to build them.

Solomon was keenly aware that he was going to leave everything he had worked so hard to build to someone who had done nothing to earn it. He had done all the hard work to gather great possessions and to construct great structures, but he had not involved his sons and heirs in the work, not even his oldest son. At his death his son was going to receive everything without working for it. He said he knew that all too often those who receive such favors without working for them soon destroy or lose what they have received. He knew that gains easily obtained without work to achieve them are seldom appreciated. When people receive wealth and favors without paying a price for them, more often than not they squander and waste them. What comes too easily, goes quickly away. He obviously was afraid that tragedy was going to come to his son, because he had not prepared his son to know how to protect and handle the favors he was going to receive. It made all his work vanity and emptiness.

Solomon saw that the same result could come to any man's hard work. He took time to express his misgivings in hope that other men would learn from his mistake and build more than physical and financial achievements. He hoped other men would learn to teach their sons the value of possessions by showing them how to work to achieve them. Then they also would know how to preserve them.

**Verses 2:22-23. All I received from my possessions was work, suffering, and worry.** Solomon gave a third explanation of why he felt it was vanity to leave his great possessions to someone else. It was because all he had gotten out of his great wealth and possessions was labor, pain, and worry. He had spent his days in frustration and his nights in worry. He had not taken time for rest, recuperation, or refueling. All his life had been one long drive after ambition, achievement, and rushing from one responsibility to another. In the midst of it, he had never taken time to enjoy any of it. Now he realized he had not received any real benefit. Someone else was going to enjoy the results of his labor, but he never had. All of it was just vanity and wasted effort.

Solomon's groans were a tragic way for a man to end a momentous life, but those groans still need to be heard around the world. God inspired Solomon to write those moanings into the Scripture for the benefit of all future generations. Men everywhere need to hear and learn that, if a man spends his whole life on work and achievement, he

will end up with disappointment and sorrow. Life consists of more than wealth, fame, and worldly accomplishment. If a man fails to put God ahead of his work and career, though he gains the whole world, he ends his life with disappointment and vanity.

***B Nothing [is] good for a man except that he must eat and he drinks and he sees good to himself in his labor (2:24).***

***1. I saw this also [is] from the hand of God (2:24b).***

***a. Because who eats, and who enjoys apart from Me (2:25-26)?***

***(1) For to a man who [is] good before His face, He gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy (2:26a).***

***(2) To the sinner He gives the trouble of gathering and collecting in order to give [it] to [one who is] good before God's face (2:26b).***

***b. So this also is vanity, grabbing at the wind (2:26c).***

***2. For every everything [there is] a time and a season (3:1-9),***

***a. For every activity under the heavens (3:1-8)***

***(1) A time to give birth and a time to die (3:2a);***

***(2) A time to plant and a time to twist up what was planted (3:2b);***

***(3) A time to kill and a time to heal (3:3a);***

***(4) A time to tear down and a time to build up (3:3b);***

***(5) A time to weep and a time to laugh (3:4a);***

***(6) A time to mourn and a time to dance (3:4b);***

***(7) A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones (3:5a);***

***(8) A time to embrace and a time to avoid embracing (3:5b);***

***(9) A time to acquire and a time to destroy (3:6a);***

***(10) A time to keep and a time to throw away (3:6b);***

***(11) A time to tear and a time to sew (3:7a);***

***(12) A time to be silent and a time to speak (3:7b);***

***(13) A time to love and a time to hate (3:8a);***

***(14) A time for war and a time for peace (3:8b).***

***b. What benefit [comes] to a doer from all his labor (3:9)?***

***3. I see that God has given this occupation to the sons of men to be occupied with it (3:10-13).***

***a. He has made everything beautiful in its time (3:11a);***

***(1) And he has put the ages in their minds (3:11b),***

***(2) Yet so that man may not discover what God is doing from the beginning to the end (3:11c).***

***b. I know that nothing [is] good for them except to rejoice and to do good throughout his life (3:12-15),***

***(1) And also that the man eats and he drinks and he sees good in all his labor.***

***(2) It is the gift of God (3:13).***

***4. I know that all that God does lasts for an age (3:14).***

***(1) There is nothing to add and nothing to take away (3:14b).***

***(2) God has done it so that they will fear before His face (3:14c).***

***5. That which is [has been] already (3:15);***

***(1) That which [is] to be has been already (3:15b),***

***(2) And God seeks that which has been chased away (3:15c).***

**A second reason Solomon gave for saying hard work is vanity was that no matter how hard**

**a person works God determines the outcome of his efforts. He realized that God is at work in the**

world and that what He wishes is what gets accomplished in the end. God involves Himself in every person's life, whether that person acknowledges it or not. What a person accomplishes is what God decides, not how much work the person puts into it. He explained that conclusion in five ways.

**Verses 2:24-26. God blesses the simple life.** Solomon began his explanation of how God determines the outcome of a person's life by saying that the only achievement in life that is truly good is for a man to have enough to eat and drink and to enjoy his life and work. Anything more is just a burden to worry over and a fear to endure because he might lose it. Having enough to not be in want but not enough to fill a life with burden and worry is the only really satisfying way to live.

All English versions translate verse 24 with words almost identical to HCSB, which says, "*There is nothing better for man than to eat, drink, and to enjoy his work.*" Perhaps that translation is correct, but the usual way to express the comparative degree in Hebrew is "*There is nothing good from . . .*" Solomon wrote, "*There is nothing good except that . . .*" Maybe we should take his words exactly literally and understand he was not describing one way of living that is better than another, but the only way that brings satisfaction in life. In that case, the statement means it is all right to have more, but the extra adds nothing to a person's life. After his basic needs are met, the overage is just a responsibility to take care of and a burden to add to a person's worries. What makes a person content and free of worries is to have just enough and to enjoy it.

Solomon said living that simple life comes from the hand of God. It is the kind of life God planned for a man, and it is God's hand that enables him to live in that manner. When a man lives otherwise, he really does not gain anything. When his wealth and his possessions become his major emphasis, God considers him to be a sinner, and in one way or another God takes away from him the gains he achieved from selfish ambition, human drive, and personal effort. Then God gives what he achieved to another person who pleases Him. In other words, God blesses the life of a man who honors Him and

subtracts from the life of the man who honors things more than he honors God. Therefore, the outcome of a person's hard work is determined by what God decides, not by how hard that person works. Solomon was not saying it is vanity for God to favor the man who trusts and obeys Him. It is right and just that He does so. Solomon was saying it is vanity for a man to neglect God, since God will determine the outcome of his life not how hard he works.

In life, it is really true that the only one who finds satisfaction and joy is the one who pleases God and with whom God is pleased. So God determines the satisfaction a person receives out of life, not the person himself. Contentment comes from trusting God, not from working for ourselves.

**Verses 3:1-9. God confines life to set rhythms.** Solomon continued his explanation of how God determines the outcome of a person's life by pointing out that life consists of an established rhythm that God established and that no one can avoid. Life includes many contrasting occasions that come to everyone. Those occasions ebb and flow in people's lives and are beyond their control. They determine what a person does and what his deeds will produce more than his own labor. Solomon described a long list of those occasions, and every thoughtful person recognizes that all of them have come or will come into his life at an appropriate time. Birth and death come to every life, but they are totally beyond a person's control. Planting and harvesting come when the seasons are right, and ignoring those seasons only results in crop failure. The time comes when a faithful pet is old and sick and suffering beyond hope of a cure and it is best to end the pet's life to save it from further suffering. At other times, a person will spend large sums of money and stay awake all night to care for a beloved pet and save its life because it is healthy enough to heal. The wise man recognizes the difference and acts accordingly. The same is true of every other life event Solomon mentioned. Therefore, the rhythm of life that God has established determines more of what people do and what they accomplish than how hard they work.

Awareness of the set rhythm of life made Solomon wonder why workmen put so much energy

into activities whose outcome they do not and cannot control. He meant it is best to trust and obey God, because He is the One who determines the events that come and go in our lives and the outcome of those events. He also is the One who enables us to be content with the life He gives.

**Verses 3:10-13. Contentment comes from following God's plan for people's lives.** Solomon further discussed how God is control of the outcome of a person's life by saying the simple life is the occupation God planned for men. By "occupation" he meant, not a person's life's work, but the life with which God planned for them to be occupied, the life they were to be busy living. God planned for people to be able to live and thrive on rather meager requirements, and having those minimal needs is enough to enable them to have a strong and healthy life. Those basic requirements are all that is needed to be able to live a meaningful life. Solomon was aware of that truth because he had seen men who had few of the earth's possessions who were loved and happy throughout life, while he had seen others who had more of the world's wealth and bounties than they could count and were miserable every day they lived. Therefore, the good way to live was to have enough and to be happy with it.

Solomon went on to describe what can enable a person to be content with that simple life. First, he said God has made everything beautiful in its own time (v. 11). Everything God has made is good and has a good purpose. Man's best occupation is to find the beauty and good that God has placed around him, instead of trying to make his own beauty and good. If people will just take time to appreciate all the good God has placed around them, they will be content to just enjoy it and will need nothing more. Also God has put the ages in men's hearts, which means God has given people a yearning to live on through the ages. God's purpose in doing so is to help people live for more than today and for more than the achievements of their hands. Yet Solomon said God intentionally hides from people how He is working to fulfill that yearning, so they will trust Him. People find contentment when they take the long view and look forward to continuing through the ages by trusting God. They find contentment by expecting God to

continue to do good for them through all the ages and by trusting Him to take care of them through it all, whatever comes.

Second, Solomon said God plans for people to be occupied with doing good for others, rather than from being absorbed with themselves (vs. 12-13). Doing good for others means helping the needy, encouraging the sad, ministering to the sick, and witnessing to the sinful. Doing good for God, for the world, and for others is more important than working and striving for ourselves. Therefore, living the good life means being satisfied with enough to eat and drink and being able to see the good in the work we do each day. Living that kind of life is the gift of God. Our efforts will never achieve it. God will give it to those who trust in Him.

Solomon did not mean that a person should stop working and just wait on God to do what He wishes. He made that obvious when he spoke of a man who "*sees good in all his labor.*" He meant that a man who lives the simple life sees that whatever God has given him to do is good and worthwhile. He is not to expect to be free of labor; but he is to know that his labor, no matter how humble, fits into God's purpose. Therefore, it gives him contentment. God designed people to live that way, and He assigned people the responsibility of living that way to make their living worthwhile. Fortunate are those who find it. They make a greater impact for good on the world than the man who builds an empire to his own glory.

**Verse 14. Only what God does lasts.** Solomon gave another insight into how God determines the outcomes of a person's life by stressing that what God does lasts for an age, while human effort is only temporary. Furthermore, God's works are finished and perfect. Nothing can be added to them, and nothing can be subtracted from them. So it is much better to trust in what God does than to try to achieve accomplishments for ourselves. God made the imperfection of human efforts to contrast with His perfect works for that very purpose. They are to teach people to fear Him, that is, to trust their lives and the outcome of their lives to Him. When they do, He makes their days enjoyable and their future bright.

**Verse 15. Life is just a series of grand repetitions.** Solomon closed his discussion of how God determines the final outcome of a person's life by acknowledging that no matter how great a person's accomplishments are, they are not unique. Someone has done them before, and someone will repeat them again in the future. A great inventor may invent something new, but he is only one in a great line of inventors who have kept life moving forward and who will keep life moving forward as long as people exist. A great builder may construct the tallest or the biggest building in history, but great builders have built structures before him that rival his works in many ways, and someone will surely arise tomorrow to surpass what he has done today. A great conqueror may subdue many nations, but he is far from the first conqueror to

raise an empire only to lose it all in tragedy. Neither will he be the last. A great writer may inscribe beautiful and powerful words, but so many others have done the same before him and will do the same again in the future that his books soon will be lost and forgotten in the unending array of thoughts that come from the minds of men. Life is one grand repetition after another, and if men lose track of one accomplishment God seeks to bring it back through someone else. Therefore, no man's work is that impressive. It is far better to trust in the works of God and find pleasure in doing His will. A person should live for what God does for him and through him, not for what he can do by himself.

- C. And also I saw that under the sun in the place of justice there is wickedness and in the place of righteousness there is wickedness (3:16-4:3).**
- 1. I said in my heart (3:17):**
    - a. God will judge the righteous and the wicked (3:17a),**
    - b. Because there is a time for every activity and every work (3:17b).**
  - 2. I said in my heart, [it is] on purpose for the sons of men (3:18-22)**
    - (1) For God to purify them (3:18b)**
    - (2) And to show them that they are animals, them, yes them (3:18c-21).**
      - (a) Because what happens to the sons of men and what happens to animals [are] one happening (3:19-21).**
        - (a) As this one dies, so that one dies (3:19b).**
        - (b) One breath is in them all (3:19c).**
          - [1] The man has no advantage over the animals (3:19d),**
          - [2] So all effort is vanity (3:19e).**
        - (d) All go to one place (3:20-21).**
          - [1] All are from the dirt,**
          - [2] And all are returning to the dirt (3:20b).**
        - (e) Who knows [if] the spirit of man ascends upward and [if] the spirit of the animal descends downward to the earth (3:21)?**
      - (b) So I saw nothing [is] better than that man should enjoy his work (3:22),**
        - (a) Because that is his portion (3:22b),**
        - (b) For who will bring him to see into what will be after him (3:22c)?**
    - 3. Then I saw again all the oppressions that are being done under the sun and—behold!--all the tears of the oppressed (4:1-3)**
      - a. And no one was comforting them (4:1b-1d),**
        - (1) And power was on the side of their oppressors (4:1c),**
        - (2) And no one was comforting them (4:1d).**
      - b. And I praised the dead who already have died more than the living who are still alive (4:2-3);**
        - (1) And better than both is the one who has not yet lived (4:3a),**
        - (2) Who has not seen the evil doing that goes on under the sun (4:3b).**

**The third reason Solomon gave for saying a person's hard work is vanity was the world is so full of injustice and oppression.** He saw that the authority figures who were set up to dispense justice were unrighteous and unjust themselves. Therefore, no matter how hard a person worked, the results could all be taken away by greedy and unjust people in authority. If unjust men did not take away a person's possessions, living in the midst of injustice and oppression made enjoying one's possessions impossible. Paul developed his discussion of how oppression and wickedness made hard work to be vanity in three points.

**Verses 3:17. God will judge the righteous and the wicked.** Solomon acknowledged that God will judge the righteous and the wicked. He reasoned that God has ordered the world in such a way that a time exists for every activity and every work; therefore, He must have set aside a time to judge the righteous and the wicked. But even when Solomon recognized that encouraging truth, it did not take away from him the strain of living in a vicious world.

**Verses 3:18-22. God allows wickedness to prosper to humble men so they will repent.** Then Solomon reasoned that, if God will judge the righteous and the wicked but is delaying in doing so, He must have a reason for allowing injustice to continue. He cited two reasons. The first reason was so people will turn to God to be purified (v. 18b). When a person is treated unjustly, he recognizes that the unjust world cannot purify him from his sins. The unjust world has no purity to give. A sinner has only one place where he can turn to receive cleansing, and that place is God. By suffering from injustice, people learn to turn to God for what they cannot receive from the unjust world. So they turn to God to be purified of their own sinfulness.

The second reason Solomon cited for God's leaving injustice in the world was to humble people and help them recognize they were created beings just like the animals (vs. 18c-22c). Men and animals are made from the same physical, earthy materials. Both breathe the same air. Both get old or sick and die. Both return to the same dirt from which they were made. Furthermore, no one has a

way to know through our own efforts or ingenuity if people have a different destiny after death from animals. People's bodies are unconscious after death and cannot speak, and no one has ever returned to tell what happened to them. People have the same physical lives as animals, perhaps on different mental levels, but they still have physical lives in physical bodies that share the same general characteristics that animals have: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and feeling.

Solomon's emphasis was good. People need to be aware of their likeness to animals and to be humbled by it, because it will drive them to turn to God for uplift and deliverance. People need to be humbled so they can recognize they are created beings like the animals and dependent on God for their lives and their destinies. If people never had to deal with their creaturely natures, they probably would be content to think they have all they need and be content to live our lives without trusting God. So Solomon's emphasis that people and animals share a common physical life is true and a revelation given by God.

Nevertheless, Solomon's words are puzzling, even troubling. Did he really believe people have no way of knowing what comes after death? Did he really believe that a man's life ends at the grave and is no more? Definitely not, because he had said in verse 11 of this same chapter that God has put the ages in people's minds. If he believed God has given people the ability to conceive of an extended life beyond the grave and to desire to have it, such a life had to be possible. He knew it was not possible for people to extend their lives after death by their own works, so it had to be available from God.

In addition, in verse 17 of this very same passage Solomon said that God will judge the righteous and the wicked, which means that a person's destiny after death is determined by God. Perhaps Solomon's ideas about how that judging will take place were vague. For that matter, believers' ideas about the judgment and about rewards or punishments after death are still somewhat vague and undefined, even after God has revealed much more information about life after death than Solomon had. But Solomon's belief in the judgment must have meant that he expected God



to justly decide what happens to people after death. He knew God is just and good, and he was content to leave his eternal destiny to God.

Even more significant is Solomon's statement near the end of His book, "*and the dust returns to the earth as it once was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it*" (Eccl. 12:7, HCSB). That statement was his firm conclusion after he had exhausted explaining all his disappointments and frustrations. Those words show that he definitely knew that people have a spirit that is more than dirt. It comes from God, not out of the ground; and after death it lives on to return to God. However, Solomon didn't gain that assurance from human reason or science. He received it by revelation from God. There is a way for a person to know that life continues after death. Solomon knew it, and believers know it today because God reveals it. In the Scriptures, God has revealed more about life after death than most people will admit. Revelation is still the only way people can know for sure that human life continues on after death. We can rejoice with Solomon that we know a God who reveals to us what our human insight can never penetrate.

From historical records and from archaeological discoveries, it is well known that peoples of all nations in Solomon's day expected to live on after death and that they spent much of their time and wealth preparing for that after life. The Egyptians were so preoccupied with living on after death that they spent their whole lives preparing mausoleums and saving for the cost of mummifying their bodies, because they believed that preservation of their bodies was important to help them have a full life after death. Some of the pharaohs impoverished their whole nation making preparations for their lives to continue in luxury after death. It is incredible that God's people, living in the midst of nations that had such firm beliefs about life after death, should have no expectation of life after death. It may very well be that true believers in Solomon's day and before said little about life after death because they rejoiced that Jehovah God makes life on earth good and meaningful, whereas false gods do not. It may also be because they knew that the best preparation for life after death is to trust God and to live in obedience to Him in this life.

Therefore, when Solomon asked who knows if the spirit of a man goes upward to God at death and if the spirit of an animal goes downward to the earth, he meant human insight and knowledge cannot answer that question. People cannot see beyond the grave and have no way of learning what happens afterward. No one can prove by human science or reason that people's spirits are made of an intangible reality that lives on after death or that animals' spirits are only mechanisms of their physical bodies that return to the dirt. What people do know is that they live and die like animals and are buried in the same ground. By human wisdom it is well known that people share a common life and death with animals. Therefore, from the point of view of what people can discover on their own, the best people can do with their lives is trust God and enjoy the work He gives them to do--and leave to God what will happen to them when they die. Then God reveals to those who are open to Him that human beings do have an additional kind of life that animals do not have. They have a spirit life that never ends. After death, that spirit continues to exist and either lives with God in peace and joy or survives in suffering and misery forever.

**Verses 4:1-3. Injustice and oppression is so strong that the results of a person's hard work can be taken away quickly, making all his efforts vanity.** Then Solomon looked again at the injustices and oppressions in the world. He realized that worldly power was in the hands of the unrighteous and the unjust, and the oppressed people of the world had no way to change that reality. People had no one to defend them or even to comfort them in their distresses. All the power was in the hands of the oppressors, and the poor and the weak had no one to deliver them. In spite of all the effort people have invested in trying to stamp out injustice in the world, it still is rampant everywhere. A person still can work hard for years and then have all he gained taken away from him by powerful and unjust people.

One must wonder if Solomon was aware that he had been one of those oppressors. He had taxed the people more than they could bear. He had drafted men into virtual slavery to construct his great monuments. He had lived in unreasonable luxury while others were hungry around him. After his

death when people were no longer afraid of him, they begged his son for relief, but they did not receive it from him any more than they had received it from Solomon. However, humans seldom see our own failures unless God reveals them to them. Solomon was just beginning to be aware of his many failures, and he was confessing them. However, at the moment, whether he realized his participation in oppression or not, he was aware that injustice abounded all around him and he mourned over what he saw all over the world.

Solomon concluded that from the human point of view, people's hard work was futile because it could so easily be taken away by unscrupulous men. In despair, he proclaimed that people are better off dead, because death removes them from the clutches of the oppressors. He even went further and declared that it is even better if a person is never born and never has to suffer under the oppressions of this world.

We still live in that kind of a world. Hunger, disease, pain, suffering, tears, and loneliness exist in the world as much as ever. Constantly evil men deceive and overpower innocent and helpless people and take away from them all they own.

Persecution of good men abounds, and every day people around the world suffer and die because of their faith in the true God. Many of them would welcome death over the imprisonment, torture, and privation they suffer every day. Multitudes of others are not imprisoned in walls but live in limitations set by unjust laws and hostile cultures that deprive them of a free and full life. For them death comes as a relief. Solomon's words are not an exaggeration. They are not the unreal complaints of a deeply depressed man. They recognize reality. Living in that kind of a world does make us know that death is a deliverance if we know God. It made Solomon know with absolute clarity that oppression and wickedness in the world denied a person the ability to know he would ever enjoy the benefits of his hard work. Therefore, it was vanity.

In all the ways Solomon had reviewed, he learned that the injustices of this world teach us that hard work on earth is vanity. Wise men recognize that same condition exists today. Their wisdom recognizes that comfort and peace come from something more than hard work, and that something more is God.

**D. Then I saw that all labor and all skill in work is because of this--man's jealousy of his associate. This also is futile, grabbing at the wind (4:4-16).**

1. *The fool folds his arms and consumes his own flesh (4:5),*
  - a. *[Thinking] a handful of rest is better than two handfuls of labor (4:6a),*
  - b. *But grabbing at the wind (4:6b).*
2. *But I turned and I saw [another] vanity under the sun (4:7-8)*
  - a. *Which is one without another, not even a son or a brother to him (4:8a).*
    - (1) *With no end to all his labor (4:8b),*
    - (2) *Yet his eye is not content with riches (4:8c-8e)*
      - (a) *So for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure (4:8d)?*
      - (b) *This also is vanity, and it is a miserable occupation (4:8e).*
  - b. *Two are better than one, because they have a good wage for their labor (4:9-12).*
    - (1) *Because if they should fall, one will pick up his partner; but woe to the one who falls when there is no other to pick him up (4:10).*
    - (2) *Also if two lie down together, they are warm; but for one, how will he get warm (4:11)?*
    - (3) *And whereas one may overpower just one, two might withstand him (4:12a).*
  - c. *A tripled cord is not easily broken (4:12b).*
3. *A poor but wise youth is better than an old but foolish king who still does not know how to take advice (4:13-16).*
  - a. *Even if he came from being bound to become king, and even if he was born poor in his kingdom (4:14-16a),*

- b. I saw all the living who move about under the sun [were] with the youth, the successor, when he began to stand in his place (4:15).*  
 (1) *There was no end to all the people, to all who were before them (4:16a).*  
 (2) *However, those coming afterward are not pleased with him (4:16b).*  
*c. Thus this also is vanity and grabbing at the wind (4:16c).*

**Solomon gave a fourth reason for saying hard work is vanity. It was that people only work hard so they can gain more than someone else.** People don't sacrifice to work and achieve because they really need all the abundance they work for. They do it to get ahead of others or even to gain power over others. Sweating and laboring to outdo someone else is a miserable way to live. The person who lives to get ahead of someone else does not enjoy either his labor or the results of his labor. He only worries that someone will surpass him, and someone always does. He is wasting his time as much as a man who tries to catch the wind and hold it. His work to get ahead of others turns out to be vanity. He developed that idea in three sections.

**Verses 4:4-6. Idleness is vanity.** Solomon did not mean that being idle was a desirable way to live. He specifically took time to say idleness is vanity. He described a lazy person as a person who folds his arms and consumes his own flesh. While he is sitting still and doing nothing, his own body is consuming itself to have something to sustain it. The lazy man has the attitude that one hour spent resting is better than two hours of hard work. Solomon said the one who takes that attitude is a fool. He is wasting his life on nothing at all. His life is as empty as that of a man who tries to catch the wind.

**Verses 4:7-12. Working selfishly is also vanity.** Then Solomon turned his eyes in the opposite direction and saw an equal vanity, which was a man's working feverishly to get ahead of others only to discover he lost far more than he gained. A man who works hard to get ahead of others may gain materially, and he may gather more than all of his acquaintances; but he ends up losing something much more valuable. He loses his friends and soon stands alone and lonely. He has no one with whom to share his possessions and accomplishments, and he finds he cannot enjoy them alone. All his wealth and property cannot embrace him or encourage him or love him, or have

friendship with him. His drive to outdo all of his friends drove them all away, and he is left with nothing but unfeeling and unmoving objects that cannot reach out to him in any way.

Solomon said one man without another is a super-vanity. He specifically referred to a man who did not even have the friendship of a brother or a son. He must have been talking about himself. He certainly had never had any meaningful relationship with any of his brothers. The conflicts and intrigues in his father David's family were mammoth. His only full brother died soon after birth as a punishment to David for stealing another man's wife (2 Sam. 12:12:1-23). One half-brother Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1-20). Later Tamar's full brother Absalom murdered Amnon (2 Sam. 13:21-39). Still later Absalom led a massive rebellion against his father David because David had not taken action to punish Amnon. In the process Absalom was killed while hanging helpless in a tree (2 Sam. 15:1-18:33). Another brother Adonijah led a revolt against David that was thwarted only by David's rising from his death bed to arrange for Solomon to be anointed as king before Adonijah could complete his sedition (1 Kings 1:1-53). The only mention of Solomon's having any contact with one of his half-brothers was when he showed mercy to Adonijah after he was anointed as king but sent Adonijah home so he would have no further contact with him (1 Kings 1:41-53) and then later commanded Adonijah's execution when Adonijah showed he still had designs on the throne (1 Kings 2:13-25). Solomon was isolated from his brothers in his youth and throughout his reign.

The same aloofness existed between Solomon and his sons. Solomon's failure to be involved in his sons' lives has already been noted. Surely he was the man to whom he was referring when he spoke of a man without a friend, not even a brother or a son. What had it done to him to be without a friend? He had devoted his life to working and gaining riches, but they give him no comfort. He

had deprived himself of rest and pleasure in his drive to gain and outdo everyone else, and now he knew it all was vanity. It was a miserable way to be occupied with life.

Then Solomon cited instances that showed the advantage of working with others instead of alone or in competition with others. He said two men working together have the advantage of earning two wages. Thus, they can share and help each other in times of need. They don't need to outdo each other, because they share and help each other. Also, when a man has a partner with whom to share his work, he has the advantage in the daytime that, if one falls, the other will help him up. On the other hand, a man who works alone has no one to help when he falls down. At nighttime having a partner is an equal advantage because, when they lie down to sleep, they can keep each other warm, whereas a man who works by himself has to shiver in the cold alone. And if a person works alone, a robber or a rival might attack and wound him or even kill him; but if he has a comrade, the two can defend each other and drive off the attacker. Solomon had never had any of those kinds of friendships, because he had always worked hard to gain for himself and to outdo everyone else. Now he knew how much he had sacrificed and lost. He needed a friend, because he was facing old age and death, and he had no one to help him through it.

No doubt Solomon uttered his closing words about the value of a friend with a pitiful moan. He said, "*a tripled cord is not easily broken.*" Did he mean, he was about to break, because he had no comrade to help him? As he faced weakness and death, none of his accomplishments could help him. He was just one strand facing his disappointments alone.

**Verse 4:13-16. A sad personal example.** Then Solomon gave an illustration of the vanity that comes from working alone or working only to benefit one's self. He said a young man who is poor but wise makes a better king than an old, experienced king who does not know how to listen to advice. The wise young man is preferred even if he comes from being bound and even if he was born in poverty.

Almost all English versions translate verse 14 to say "came out of prison," and sometimes the word can mean imprisonment. However, the word actually has a much broader meaning and refers to any kind of binding or limitation. Solomon used the passive participle of the verb, which means "being bound." It means the young man was restrained in some way but still preferred as king. People considered him to be preferable as king than the old worn out king.

Solomon's statement described such a specific situation, it makes one wonder if he was talking about someone in particular. He continued with an even more specific reference that raises that question even more.

Solomon continued by saying he saw a great multitude of people standing before a new young king at the side of the old king. The crowd was welcoming the beginning of the young king's reign as he was being installed into office in the presence of the old king. There seemed to be no end to the people who gathered to acclaim the new king and to install him into office. The occasion must have been exciting and exhilarating. It filled the new king and the people with hope. It was a time of unity and joy. However, Solomon went on to describe people who lived under that king's rule years later and possibly were born after he became king. They did not see him in the same light. They did not rejoice over his rule. He had failed them in many ways, and they took no pleasure in him. It was a sad sight to see a king make such an impressive beginning only to come to such a disappointing end. It turned his whole reign into vanity.

Comparing Solomon's words with what we know of his own experience gives strong assurance that Solomon's illustration was about himself. Solomon said he saw the crowd that gathered to welcome the young king, indicating he was present for the occasion. Then he spoke like he was describing a personal experience when he said that the people coming later in the king's rule were not pleased with him. Those words along with the description that preceded them sound so specific and so personal, they strongly indicate Solomon was talking about himself and his own reign.

Everything he described fits his own experiences, which can be summarized as follows:

After Solomon had ruled for many years, he observed among his drafted workers an industrious young man named Jeroboam who got work done quickly and well. He promoted Jeroboam to be his chief boss over all of his drafted laborers (1 Kings 11:28). God chose to use that young man to punish Solomon for his sins and unfaithfulness. He sent the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite to tell Jeroboam God was displeased that Solomon had encouraged and ignored the worship of false gods in Jerusalem and, therefore, was going to take ten of the tribes of Israel away from Solomon and make Jeroboam ruler over those tribes. He even told Jeroboam the rule of his house would be permanent if he would be faithful to God (1 Kings 11:29-39). With those words to encourage him, Jeroboam sought to lead a rebellion against Solomon (1 Kings 11: 26-27). Though Solomon must have heard of Ahijah's prophecy, he did not repent. Instead, he crushed Jeroboam's attempt at rebellion and sought to kill Jeroboam. Jeroboam fled to Egypt and found asylum there until Solomon died. After Solomon's death, when his son Rehoboam refused the people's request to lighten their taxes and forced labor, Israel's ten northern tribes called for Jeroboam and made him their king. Since the northern tribes called for Jeroboam to return from Egypt so quickly, they obviously had wanted him to be their king from the time he had attempted a rebellion (1 Kings 11:26-12:19).

When Solomon was writing the Book of Ecclesiastes, he surely knew of the desire that many had for Jeroboam to be king, and he felt the sting of people preferring as their king a young man who came out of poverty and who was bound by being forced to live in exile. It especially stung him because he realized he had been too old and too proud to take advice from Ahijah's prophecy and change his ways. Solomon's words in these verses sound all too similar to his experience with Jeroboam to be hypothetical. He realized he had made a terrible mistake, and it was too late to change.

Faced with those sad conditions, Solomon's mind turned back to the days when he was anointed king at David's command in order to head off Adonijah's rebellion. David sent Zadok the high priest, Nathan the prophet, his private body guards, and their commander Benaiah to anoint Solomon to be king at the Gihon Spring before all the people. From there a great procession followed as Solomon was escorted to the palace and into the king's presence, where he was seated on the king's throne (1 Kings 1:1-40). The Scriptural account of Solomon's anointing ends with,

***39 Then they blew the ram's horn, and all the people proclaimed, "Long live King Solomon!" 40 All the people followed him, playing flutes and rejoicing with such a great joy that the earth split open from the sound" (HCSB).***

Solomon's description in Ecclesiastes 4:15-16a sounds too much like Solomon's experience when he was anointed as king to allow us to surmise that he was referring to anyone other than himself.

When Solomon was writing the Book of Ecclesiastes, it was nearly forty years after he had been anointed. People had become disappointed with his rule, and they were eager for him to be replaced. A rival to the throne had escaped his grasp and was waiting for an opportunity to be enthroned. It was a sad situation for a king who had exhausted himself seeking to build his nation. It was the end result of a life devoted primarily to human labor and achievement. It was the sad end of a reign that preferred human effort and glory over obedience to God. All Solomon could conclude from it was, ***"Thus this also is vanity and grabbing at the wind."***

The point of this whole section is that hard work is an empty enterprise if it is done in human strength and for human glory. No matter how much a person's work may accomplish, it ends up being empty human vanity. A person needs to find something more satisfying and more lasting on which to build his life than hard work, because hard work for its own sake is just another vanity.