

## “When Life Isn’t Fair” (part 2)

Ecclesiastes 4:1-6

One of the greatest moves of God’s Spirit in modern history happened in the 1700’s and is often referred to as the Wesleyan Revival, simply because its roots can be traced to the ministry of two brothers, John and Charles. At the beginning of the 18th century, England was a spiritual cesspool and had sunk into a deep moral quagmire. Eric Metaxas has said that without exaggeration, John and Charles Wesley’s efforts—their evangelism and ministry to the poor, the disenfranchised, and the hopeless—changed the world. It can also be said without exaggeration that who these great men were and all they did in their lives had every-thing to do with the extraordinary woman who raised them.

Susanna Wesley was a remarkable woman. Born in 1669, she married Samuel Wesley when she was nineteen and they were married for 44 years. She bore 19 children. The frequent absences of her husband on business left the management of the household and the education of her children in her hands. She knew her fair share of hardship. The Wesley’s suffered illness, disease, poverty, and the death of nine of their children. On two separate occasions, fire destroyed their home and nearly killed a daughter. But through it all Susanna accepted the will of God and placed herself and her family in His hands. Instead of complaining about the unfairness of life, she remained a surrendered Christian who taught not only through the Scriptures, but through her own example of daily trust in God.

In some of her devotional writings, the woman who twice endured the loss of her home by fire and nine babies once wrote:

*“Help me, Lord, to make a true use of all disappointments and calamities in this life, in such a way that they may unite my heart more closely with Thee.”*

In another place, she said:

*“We must know God experientially, for unless the heart perceive and know Him to be to be the supreme good, her only happiness, unless the soul feel and acknowledge that she can have no repose, no peace, no joy, but in loving and being loved by Him.”*

With that in mind, I want you to open your Bible with me to the fourth chapter of Ecclesiastes, where we will read from the first six verses. I want to speak to you from the subject, “When Life Isn’t Fair.” Have you ever felt that way before? Sure you have. Perhaps you were mistreated by another person, or perhaps you have felt that you weren’t getting recognized for something you thought you ought to be recognized for. Perhaps things didn’t turn out the way you thought they should in the life of someone you love. The fact of the matter is that all of us have experienced the ‘unfairness’ of life at various points.

King Solomon of Israel had been there, too. He writes all about it in the book of Ecclesiastes. Now, I have already pointed out to you a couple of ways that life appeared to be unfair to Solomon. The first way was the perceived lack of justice. When he looked around at life ‘under the sun,’ Solomon says that in the place where there ought to be justice and righteousness, he saw wickedness. Things seemed to be upside down rather than right-side up. They seem that way because they are that way. No book of the Bible better shows us the pervasiveness of sin in a fallen world than this book. Life in a fallen world is frustrating and disappointing. To use Solomon’s favorite word, it is ‘vanity.’ We’re born, we live, we work, we die. What do we have to show for it? It all seems so empty ‘under the sun.’

And yet that is the point of it all. You and I were never meant to find our contentment in things under the sun, but rather in the One who sits above the sun. When it comes to matters of justice, we need to remember that He is the ultimate Judge. While it seems that sin goes unpunished, in truth, none will escape.

I heard about a man who was charged with robbery. While standing in the courtroom, he asked permission to go to the bathroom. He was escorted around to the facilities, and the door was guarded while he was inside. But the man was determined to escape. He climbed up the plumbing, opened a panel in the ceiling, and starting to slink his way through the crawl space, heading south. He had traveled some thirty feet when the ceiling panels broke under him, and he dropped to the floor—right back in the courtroom before the judge himself.

Listen—when it seems that the guilty get away with their sin, it is only for a short crawl. In time, every human being will stand before the Judge.

In chapter 4, you'll notice that Solomon mentions a couple of other ways in which life seems so unfair.

### **1. Oppression without any COMFORT (4:1-3)**

*“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 of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them.”*

#### Solomon’s observation

Back up in verse 16, Solomon says that under the sun he saw wickedness where there ought to have been justice, and here he says that he found oppression where there ought to have been comfort. He essentially says, “I looked all around my world. I observed the way people were being treated. I witnessed many who were caught in the grip of oppression.”

**“Oppressions”**—*word is a passive participle; means that it is something done to you beyond your control; extortion*

And notice that the word is plural. There are multiple ways in which people are often oppressed by others. The idea is that of being taken advantage of for another's benefit. The powerful take advantage of the weak.

The Message paraphrases this way:

*“Next I turned my attention to all the outrageous violence that takes place on this planet—the tears of the victims, no one to comfort them; the iron grip of the oppressors, no one to rescue the victims from them.”*

Solomon examined all the ‘outrageous violence’ that takes place on our planet. Outrageous violence is senseless and shocking. One could only wonder what he would say if he were to read today’s headlines.

Notice he mentions the ‘tears of the oppressed.’ It is a phrase that speaks of the pain and hurt of those who have been victimized by another. Have you ever been the victim of a crime? How'd it make you feel on the inside? You feel violated. When we are wronged, there is a longing for justice that cries out from within our hearts. You want the wrong to be made right. One person has said:

*“The victims wept, but their tears did no good. Nobody stood with them to comfort or assist them. The oppressors had all the power, and their victims were helpless to protest or ask for redress.”*

When it comes to the tears of the oppressed, let me tell you something right now, there is no group of people more oppressed in our society right now than the unborn. Say what you want to and believe what you want to, but the blood of our children is on our hands as a society.

Don't you find it a tad ironic that the very people who want to eliminate choice when comes to owning guns, baking cakes, and purchasing healthcare suddenly care a great deal about choice when it comes to dismembering babies?

## Solomon's conclusion

Now in light of what I just said, perhaps it is fitting since Solomon deals with the subject of birth. Notice:

*“And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. 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 is as if he's saying, “God help the children!” His thoughts are toward the next generation. He sees what is going on in human society and it grieves him to think of those who are up and coming. What kind of world are we leaving for our kids?

His conclusion is rather pessimistic—“Better is the one who has never been born!” And without confidence in a God who rules over the universe, you could see how a person might come to this conclusion under the sun.

Back in February, there was a member of Congress who questioned whether or not it was moral to have children in the age of climate change. As if humanity's problem is the climate in which we live. Our problem is not climate change—it is heart corruption! But when you live from an under the sun perspective, you question this.

Under the sun, a person will find oppression everywhere and no comfort for the tears of those who are oppressed. It didn't seem fair to Solomon, and it doesn't seem fair to us.

God will one day judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus!

That doesn't mean that you and I shouldn't pursue what is right. As Christian men and women, we have a God-given responsibility to stand for what is right, to be a voice for the oppressed.

**Philip Ryken**—*“Depending on our place in society...as fathers and mothers, as pastors and leaders, as citizens and public officials, we are called to do what is right in the home, in the church, and in society.”*

Yet our ultimate confidence does not lie in a justice system but in the Chief Justice Himself, the Lord Jesus Christ! The day is soon coming when He will indeed judge the wicked.

Jesus Christ came to satisfy the demands of the Law, and He condemned sin in the flesh. My sin was judged when He died in my place as my substitute.

He knows what it is like to be oppressed and victimized.

Isaiah says that He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities, and the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him. By His wounds, I am healed.

**Isaiah 53:7**—**“He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.”**

If anyone had the right to say, “It isn't fair,” surely it was Him. If anyone had the right to take to Twitter and let everyone know how he was a victim, it was Him.

Through His resurrection, He now gives His life to those who repent of their sins and believe the gospel. His Spirit comes to live within you and live His life through you. And while it is true that people will mistreat you and wound you and hurt you—you are free from having to be their judge, from being the one who sees to it that they get their just desserts. You're free to forgive and leave it to the Judge. He will always do what is right.

**Romans 12:19-21**—**“Beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the**

**Lord.’ To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”**

Therefore, instead of getting angry and bitter and jaded by all the oppression we see in the world, we can trust God to make all things right in the final analysis.

## **2. Obsession without any CONTENTMENT (4:4-6)**

*“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.”*

As you move further into chapter 4, you will notice that the Preacher shifts his focus from injustice and oppression to jealousy and envy. He observe how envy often grips a person’s heart and leads him to outdo another.

**“Envy”**—*word is ‘rivalry’ in NASB; deep seated jealousy*

Have you ever heard these expressions?

- It’s a dog-eat-dog world!
- He’s burning the candle at both ends!
- It sure is lonely at the top!
- There are the have’s and have not’s!

We don’t always get what we want in life, and all too often our first impulse is to say that it isn’t fair. Yet it might just be envy, jealousy that is motivating us to think that way.

### Success

Solomon says in verse 4, “Then I saw that all toil and skill in work come from a man’s envy of his neighbor.” The NLT says, “Then I observed that most people

are motivated to success because they envy their neighbors.” They work and toil and sweat so that they can keep up with others.

We've already seen how work is a gift from God to be enjoyed for the glory of God. Yet just like all of His gifts, work can be elevated to a place of supreme importance in our lives that it wasn't never meant to occupy.

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes is simply pointing out here that much of our work is motivated by envy, by this sinful desire to get ahead in life at all costs. Unholy ambition is consumed with the desire to get ahead of someone else.

Instead of being content with what I have, envy leads a man or a woman to constantly look over their shoulder at their neighbor. Why should she have all the looks? It just isn't fair. Why should he have all the brains? It just isn't fair. What makes their kids so special? And on and on it goes.

illus. of college entrance scandal

**Philip Ryken**—*“This is why some people shortchange the government on their taxes, or cheat their customers, or get into debt with their credit cards. It is because we envy what other people have and will do anything to get it.”*

Life then becomes a competition. We work and burn the candle at both ends until we've arrived at the magical place of contentment, which is usually just a step ahead of the person we envy the most. Yet we never get there.

Two illustrations of envy from Genesis:

- Cain & Abel
- Rachel & Leah

Let me tell you something—envy is pointing an accusatory finger at God and declaring that He isn't good. It is always fed by our pride, the very taproot of our

fallen nature. Envy sullies reputations, destroys relationships, and incites murder. The obsession over success often leads to a crisis point.

As covetousness fuels our motivation, we push for more and more until we become disillusioned and burned out with life. You burn the candle at both ends long enough until you eventually run out of candle.

**Chuck Swindoll**—*“And then comes what our generation has termed the ‘mid-life crisis.’ This has been described as a time of intense personal evaluation, when frightening and disturbing thoughts surge through the mind. We start questioning who we are and why we’re here and why everything matters so much. It is a period of self-doubt and disenchantment with everything...The mind plays tricks on us. We entertain terrifying thoughts that can’t be admitted or revealed even to those closest to us.”*

### Sloth

If overworking is one extreme, notice that underachieving is another. Look at verse 5, “The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.” The New Living Translation says it this way, “Foolish people refuse to work and almost starve.” One person obsesses over work and being successful, while another obsesses over laziness and lack of personal ambition. (Burning candle vs. scratching match)

In Proverbs, Solomon talks about the ‘ sluggard.’

**Proverbs 6:6-11**—**“Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise, which, having no captain, overseer or ruler, provides her supplies in the summer, and gathers her food in the harvest. How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little holding of the hands to sleep—so shall your poverty come on you like a prowler, and your need like an armed man.”**

**Proverbs 20:4—“The sluggard will not plow because of winter; he will beg during harvest and have nothing.”**

**Proverbs 21:25-26—“The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labor. He covets greedily all day long, but the righteous gives and does not spare.”**

It is interesting that covetousness characterizes both the one who overworks and the one who underachieves. Both suffer from misplaced desire. Both make ‘self’ the supreme object in life.

When Solomon says that the fool folds his hands, it speaks of his idleness. When he says he eats his own flesh, it speaks of the consequences of his idleness.

**Derek Kidner—***“He is the picture of complacency and unwitting self-destruction, for this comment on him points out a deeper damage than the wasting of his capital. His idleness eats away not only what he has but what he is: eroding his self-control, his grasp of reality, his capacity for care and, in the end, his self-respect.”*

Some of our frustration with life may in fact simply be the consequences of idleness and indolence. (James 3:13-18)

**David Jeremiah—***“Because we are designed to be fruitful, laziness doesn’t sit well with the human spirit. Lethargy sets in, self-respect plummets, and relationships weaken. And don’t forget that for every lazy person, society pays a price. The unproductive become social burdens in various ways.”*

## Stuff

When he looked around at life under the sun, Solomon saw those who obsessed over success, those who obsessed over sloth, and those who obsessed over

stuff. Look down at verse 8, where he describes the one where “there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches.”

**“Satisfied”**—*to be full; to have enough (Exodus 16)*

No matter how much he accumulates for himself, it is never enough for he is never satisfied. He is never content.

Under the sun, Solomon found oppression without comfort, and obsession without contentment. And if our gaze goes no further, it is all we will find too. It is vanity and striving after wind. So what is the answer?

Look at verse 6:

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

We need soul contentment. We need soul satisfaction. It doesn't come through perfect circumstances. It doesn't come through working yourself to death. It doesn't come through quitting on life.

Maybe you just can't get past the presence of evil in the world and a consuming desire for justice. Maybe you are tempted to envy what other people have and then wear yourself out trying to get it. Maybe you think you are above all of that, yet you've lost your ambition and zeal for life.

The Preacher has some wise words for you to consider:

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

Better to live with contentment in your heart than with a restlessness in your soul. The quiet person is peaceful and composed amidst the pressures of life. Rather

than always striving for more or complaining about unfairness, he or she is satisfied already.

**Philippians 4:11-13—“For I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”**

It is the same principle the writer of Hebrews exhorted his readers to embrace:

**Hebrews 13:5-6—“Keep your life free from love of money and be content with what you have, for He has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’”**

Have you learned contentment? Or are you always the one who is bothered when life doesn't seem fair? Content people are 'quiet' people. Jesus didn't complain about life's unfairness. Jesus didn't envy those who had more possessions than He did. Jesus didn't fold His hands in idleness. He said that His food was to do the will of the One who had sent Him. As He worked, He simply trusted the Father to provide His daily needs. He invested Himself totally in submission to the Father's will, even though it meant a cross of suffering. He was always content in His relationship with His Father, and I am to be content in my relationship with Him.

I read the story about a little girl who was learning her Scripture memory verses and had a little bit of trouble with the 23rd Psalm. Though she misquoted verse 1, she really got the message right. Instead of saying, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” she said, “The Lord is my shepherd; that's all I want.” Most of us want so many other things in life that it is hard for us to say that. Yet whether Jesus is all we want or not, the fact of the matter is this—He really is **all** we need.