

The Book of Ecclesiastes, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: Oppression, Companionship, and Empty Toil

Ecclesiastes 4:1–5:7

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Help the class feel the weight of life “under the sun”, its oppression, envy, and loneliness, and see that God designed companionship and the church family as a real strength against it, so that no one tries to walk alone.

Move the class from a casual view of worship to the reverent fear of God commended in Ecclesiastes 5:1–7, drawing near to listen, guarding the tongue, and keeping our word, and connect that reverence to the New Testament pattern of worship without binding Old Covenant forms.

Point the class forward to Christ and His unfading kingdom, the church, where the forgotten youth and the fading king of chapter four give way to the King who reigns now and is never overthrown.

Question 1

Student Question:

In Ecclesiastes 4:1–3 the Preacher sees the tears of the oppressed and power on the side of the oppressors. What does this passage teach us about the brokenness of life “under the sun,” and how does the rest of Scripture assure us that God Himself sees and will judge the oppressor (Psalm 12:5; Romans 12:19)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The Preacher “returned” to consider oppression, suggesting this is something he keeps coming back to because it keeps confronting him. What grips him is not the abstraction of injustice but its human face: “the tears of the oppressed.” Twice in one verse he notes “they had no comforter,” and the repetition is the ache of the whole scene. Power sits on the wrong side of the table, and the weak have no advocate.

His conclusion in 4:2–3 is the darkest sentiment in the book so far: the dead are better off than the living, and the unborn better still. We should read this as the honest cry of a man surveying a fallen world without lifting his eyes above the sun, not as a doctrine to build a life on. Scripture elsewhere prizes life as God’s gift, so this is lament, not legislation. It is the kind of thing Job and the Psalmists also say in their grief.

The relief the Preacher cannot find under the sun, God supplies from above it. The Lord declares, "Because the poor are plundered, because the needy groan, I will now arise" (Psalm 12:5). The oppressor who seems to hold all the power answers to a higher court. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Romans 12:19).

This is where the people of God step in as comforters. The world hands the oppressed tears and turns away; the church of Christ is to be the place where the lonely are taken in and the wronged are heard. We do not have to fix every injustice to be a comforter to the one in front of us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Affirm that injustice is real and that God hates it; He is not indifferent to the tears of the oppressed (Psalm 12:5).
- Read 4:2-3 as inspired lament describing a hopeless outlook "under the sun," not as a denial of the goodness of life, which Scripture affirms.
- Avoid any fatalism that shrugs at oppression because "it is all vanity"; the gospel makes us comforters, not bystanders (Galatians 6:10).
- Guard against the opposite error of trying to right every wrong by force; vengeance belongs to God (Romans 12:19).
- Note that final justice is certain even when earthly justice fails, which is the believer's hope for the oppressed.

Discussion Prompts

- Read 4:1 slowly and ask: what is the difference between hearing about oppression and seeing the tears of one oppressed person?
- Discuss: how can grief over injustice be honest before God without sliding into despair like 4:2-3?
- Ask: name one concrete way our class could be a comforter this month to someone the world has overlooked.

Question 2

Student Question:

When you read of the oppressed who "had no comforter" (4:1), where in your own life have you either been that un comforted person or walked past one, and what is God prompting you to do about it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the lens from the world to the heart. The phrase "they had no comforter" is meant to haunt us, because every one of us has at some point been the un comforted one, and

every one of us has at some point walked past one. Both experiences are worth naming honestly before God.

When we have been the uncomforted person, it is tempting to grow hard, to decide that since no one came for us, we owe no one anything. The gospel moves the other direction: the God of all comfort comforts us so that we can comfort others with the comfort we received (2 Corinthians 1:3–4). Our wounds become our credentials for compassion.

When we have been the one walking past, the issue is usually not cruelty but hurry and self-absorption. We do not see the tears because we are not looking. Reverent attention to the people God sets in our path is a discipline we can grow in.

This is a self-examination question; the leader should let the silence do its work and invite honest, specific reflection rather than tidy answers.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal accountability: each of us answers for whether we comfort or walk past (Galatians 6:10).
- The comfort we have received from God is meant to overflow to others (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).
- Hardness of heart from past hurt is a real temptation that the gospel addresses, not excuses.
- Seeing the overlooked is a discipline of attention, not merely a feeling of pity.

Discussion Prompts

- Invite a moment of silent reflection: when have you been the one with no comforter?
- Ask gently: who is someone you may have walked past lately because you were in a hurry?
- Discuss: how does receiving God's comfort change the way we give it?

Question 3

Student Question:

Ecclesiastes 4:4–6 contrasts envious toil, the lazy fool, and “a handful with quietness.” How does Scripture warn us against both restless striving and slothful idleness, and what is the godly middle the Preacher commends (2 Thessalonians 3:10–12; 1 Timothy 6:6–8)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 4 is a piercing diagnosis: much of our toil and skill springs from “a man’s envy of his neighbor.” The engine under a great deal of human striving is not need or even love of the work, but the desire to keep up with, or get ahead of, the person next door. The Preacher calls it vanity and a striving after wind, because envy can never be satisfied; there is always another neighbor.

Verse 5 then swings to the opposite ditch: “The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh.” The lazy man ruins himself. Scripture refuses to let us escape envious overwork by sliding into idleness. Paul is blunt: “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

Between these two ditches the Preacher lays the road: “Better is a handful with quietness than two handfuls with toil and a striving after wind” (4:6). A modest portion held in peace is better than abundance held in anxiety. This is the heartbeat of contentment: “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6).

The cure for both envy and sloth is the same: contentment rooted in trust that God provides. “If we have food and clothing, with these we will be content” (1 Timothy 6:8). The contented worker labors diligently without being driven by comparison.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Envy is named as a hidden driver of much industry and must be repented of, not admired (4:4).
- Laziness is equally condemned; the believer works (2 Thessalonians 3:10–12).
- Contentment is the godly middle: a handful with quietness over two handfuls with toil (4:6; 1 Timothy 6:6–8).
- Hard work is good when its motive is service and provision, not comparison.
- Both extremes are forms of “striving after wind” because neither rests in God.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask: what does envy-driven work look like in our culture, and how is it different from honest diligence?
- Discuss: why is laziness just as much a failure as envious overwork?
- Read 4:6 together and ask what “a handful with quietness” would change about your week.

Question 4

Student Question:

Which pulls harder on you right now: the temptation to overwork out of envy and comparison, or the temptation to fold your hands and coast, and why?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses each person to locate their own besetting ditch. Some of us are wired toward the envious two-handfuls: we cannot rest, we measure ourselves against others, we add commitments we do not need. Others drift toward folded hands: we coast, we let others carry the load, we numb ourselves rather than engage.

Naming the tendency honestly is the first step toward the handful with quietness. Most of us know which way we lean; the leader can help the class be specific rather than vague.

It is worth noting that the same person can swing between both extremes in different seasons, frantic at work and idle at home, or diligent in one duty and slothful in another. The remedy in every case is contentment that trusts God's provision and timing.

This is a self-question, so the aim is honest self-knowledge that leads to a concrete adjustment, not a discussion of others' faults.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-knowledge: each believer should discern his own tendency toward striving or sloth.
- The same heart can swing between both ditches in different areas of life.
- Contentment, not willpower alone, is the cure that holds the middle road.
- Honest naming of a fault is the doorway to change.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask each person to name privately which ditch they lean toward right now.
- Discuss: what triggers your overwork or your coasting most often?
- Invite one concrete step toward "quietness" in the harder area this week.

Question 5

Student Question:

In Ecclesiastes 4:7–12 the Preacher pities the solitary man and praises companionship, saying "two are better than one" and "a threefold cord is not quickly broken." What does this teach about how God designed us for relationship, and how does the Lord's church embody that strength (Genesis 2:18; Hebrews 10:24–25)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After the cold arithmetic of envy, the Preacher pities the solitary man (4:7–8): no son, no brother, endless toil, never pausing to ask, "For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?" Wealth without people to share it is a sad business. Then comes the turn: "Two are better than one" (4:9).

He gives vivid pictures. If one falls, the companion lifts him up, but "woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up" (4:10). Two lying down keep each other warm. One can be overpowered, but two will withstand. "A threefold cord is not quickly broken" (4:12), a proverb of strength multiplied by union.

This is the design of the Creator, who said from the beginning, "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 2:18). We are made for relationship, in marriage, in family, and in the wider family of God's people. The solitary life of the man in 4:8 is not God's intent for us.

The Lord's church is where this companionship is meant to be lived out. We are told to "stir up one another to love and good works" and not to neglect "to meet together" (Hebrews 10:24–25). The assembly is not an optional add-on; it is the threefold cord God gives us so we are not quickly broken.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God designed us for companionship; isolation is not His intent (Genesis 2:18).
- Two are stronger than one: mutual help, warmth, and defense (4:9–12).
- The church family is the God-given community that embodies this strength (Hebrews 10:24–25).
- Forsaking the assembly cuts the cord that holds us; meeting together is commanded, not optional.
- Wealth or achievement without people to share life with is vanity (4:8).

Discussion Prompts

- Read 4:9–12 and ask which image, lifting, warming, or withstanding, speaks most to your life now.
- Discuss: how does regular gathering with God's people make us a threefold cord rather than a single thread?
- Ask: what does the solitary man of 4:8 warn us against in our own pursuit of more?

Question 6

Student Question:

Who are the one or two people God has placed beside you to lift you up when you fall (4:10), and are you letting them, or are you trying to live the Christian life alone?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question makes the companionship of 4:9–12 personal. God rarely leaves us truly alone; He usually places a few people beside us who can lift us when we fall. The question is whether we are letting them.

Many believers nod at "two are better than one" while living as if they were one. We hide our struggles, decline the help offered, and try to carry burdens God never meant us to carry alone. The man who falls and has no one to lift him is sometimes surrounded by people he will not let near.

Letting others in requires humility and a measure of vulnerability. It means confessing we are not self-sufficient, which the proud heart resists. Yet this is exactly the strength God built into His family.

As a self-question, the goal is for each person to name a real relationship and consider whether they are leaning on it as God intends, or holding it at arm's length.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God provides companions; the believer's task is often to let them help (4:10).
- Pride and self-sufficiency keep us isolated even when help is near.
- Vulnerability and confession open the door to the strength of the body.
- Trying to live the Christian life alone is both unnecessary and dangerous.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask each person to name the one or two people God has placed beside them.
- Discuss: what keeps us from letting others lift us when we fall?
- Invite one step toward greater openness with a trusted brother or sister this week.

Question 7

Student Question:

In Ecclesiastes 4:13–16 a poor wise youth is better than an old foolish king who will no longer take advice, yet even the youth is forgotten by those who come later. What does this passage teach about the fleeting nature of human power and popularity, and where alone is a kingdom that does not fade (Daniel 2:44; Acts 2:30–36)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In 4:13–16 the Preacher tells a small parable: a poor but wise youth is better than an old and foolish king who “no longer knew how to take advice.” The youth even rises from prison to the throne. Wisdom can outrank position, and the lowly can be lifted up.

But the Preacher will not let us rest in the youth's triumph. The crowds that once followed him will not rejoice in the one who comes after; “surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind” (4:16). Popularity is a fickle and fading thing. Today's celebrated leader is tomorrow's forgotten name. The applause moves on to the next.

This is the recurring lesson of human power under the sun: it does not last. Kings rise and fall, crowds cheer and disperse, and even the wisest earthly ruler is eventually displaced and forgotten. Nothing built on human acclaim endures.

Against this fading backdrop stands the kingdom that does not fade. “The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed” (Daniel 2:44). That kingdom came in Christ, who was raised up to David's throne and now reigns, “exalted at the right hand of God” (Acts 2:33–36). His reign is the one rule the crowds can never vote out and time can never forget.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Wisdom can outweigh position, and God can lift the lowly (4:13–14).
- Human popularity and power are fleeting; even the celebrated are forgotten (4:16).
- Nothing built on the applause of crowds endures under the sun.
- The kingdom of God in Christ never fades; He reigns now (Daniel 2:44; Acts 2:30–36).
- Avoid any view that defers Christ's reign to a future earthly throne; He is enthroned at God's right hand already.

Discussion Prompts

- Read 4:13–16 and ask: why does the Preacher refuse to let the youth's success be the happy ending?
- Discuss: where do we see the fickleness of crowds and the forgetting of yesterday's heroes today?
- Ask: how does Christ's present, unfading reign change what we build our lives on?

Question 8

Student Question:

When you picture the applause or the position you most want from others, how does the truth that even kings are quickly forgotten (4:16) reorder what you are living for?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the fading of human acclaim into a mirror for our own hearts. Most of us are quietly living for some form of recognition: a title, a following, the approval of a particular person or group. The Preacher's warning is that all of it is forgotten faster than we think.

It is humbling and freeing to admit how much of our energy chases applause that will not last. The leader can help the class name specifically what acclaim they most crave, because what we crave secretly tends to rule us.

When we remember that even kings are quickly forgotten (4:16), the grip of human approval loosens. We are freed to live for the audience of One, to seek the "well done" of the Lord rather than the cheering of the crowd.

As a self-question, the aim is a reordering of motives, trading the fading applause for the lasting approval of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Living for human applause is living for what is quickly forgotten (4:16).
- What we secretly crave from others tends to govern our choices.
- Freedom comes from living for God's approval rather than the crowd's.
- Honest self-examination of motives is part of walking with Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask: whose approval or applause are you most tempted to live for?
- Discuss: how does the certainty of being forgotten by crowds reorder your ambitions?
- Invite one shift this week from seeking human praise to seeking God's "well done."

Question 9

Student Question:

Ecclesiastes 5:1–7 calls us to guard our steps in the house of God, to be quick to hear and slow to speak, to let our words be few, and to keep our vows because "God is the one you must fear." What does true reverence look like when God's people gather, and how does the New Testament call us to that same holy fear in our worship today (John 4:24; Hebrews 12:28–29; James 1:19)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The road now turns to worship, and the tone sharpens: "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God" (5:1). Drawing near to God is not a casual thing. We are to go to listen, "to draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools." Reverence begins with the posture of a learner, not a talker.

Verses 2–3 press the point: "Let your words be few, for God is in heaven and you are on earth." Rash, many-worded prayers and vows betray a forgetfulness of who God is. James echoes this in the realm of all of life: "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak" (James 1:19). Worship is no place for careless chatter before a holy God.

Verses 4–6 take up vows: when you vow to God, do not delay paying it, for "he has no pleasure in fools." Better not to vow than to vow and not pay. Our word before God must be kept; we cannot wave it away later as a mistake. Jesus presses the same integrity: "Let what you say be simply Yes or No" (Matthew 5:37).

The whole passage lands on its anchor in 5:7: "God is the one you must fear." This is the reverent awe that the New Testament also commands. We "worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24), and we "offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:28–29). We do not bind the Old Covenant forms of the temple and its sacrifices, but the heart-posture of holy fear carries straight into the worship of the Lord's church.

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson. The God we gather to worship on the Lord's Day is holy, and casual, distracted, careless worship dishonors Him. Reverence is not Old Testament severity that the gospel softened; it is the abiding response of the creature to the Creator, now drawn near through Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reverence is essential in worship; we guard our steps and draw near to listen (5:1).
- Quick to hear and slow to speak: few words before a holy God, not careless chatter (5:2–3; James 1:19).
- Integrity in vows and words; we keep what we promise God (5:4–6; Matthew 5:37).
- The fear of God is the anchor of acceptable worship (5:7; Hebrews 12:28–29).
- Worship is in spirit and truth (John 4:24); we honor the reverent heart without binding Old Covenant temple forms.
- First-day, congregational worship of the Lord’s church is to be marked by this same awe, not casual familiarity.
- Reverence is not severity the gospel removed; it is the creature’s abiding response to the Creator, now through Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- Read 5:1–2 and ask: what does it mean to “guard your steps” and come “to listen” when we gather?
- Discuss: how can our worship slide into the “sacrifice of fools,” and how does the fear of God correct it (5:7)?
- Ask: how do we honor the reverence of this passage without binding the Old Covenant temple forms it assumes?

Question 10

Student Question:

Name one specific way the Lord Jesus is forming reverence in you this week: a careless habit in worship, an unkept word, or a rash promise He is asking you to surrender so that you draw near in awe rather than in carelessness (Ecclesiastes 5:1–2; Matthew 5:37)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks each person to let the Lord Jesus form reverence in one concrete area. The passage names three: careless words in worship, unkept vows, and rash promises. The Spirit may put a finger on any of them.

Perhaps it is a habit of distracted, going-through-the-motions worship, the “sacrifice of fools” offered while the heart and mind wander. Christ would draw us to come quiet, attentive, and expectant before the Father.

Perhaps it is a word given and not kept, a commitment to God or to His people that we let slide. Jesus calls us to let our yes be yes (Matthew 5:37), and the path of formation may be to make good on what we promised.

Perhaps it is a tendency to make rash promises in emotional moments. The lesson here is restraint: better to vow less and keep all of it than to vow grandly and pay nothing. As a self-

and-capstone question, the aim is one named, surrendered thing through which Christ deepens our reverence this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ forms reverence by addressing specific careless habits in worship (5:1).
- Keeping our word to God and His people is part of holy fear (5:4–6; Matthew 5:37).
- Restraint in promises guards us from the foolishness of broken vows.
- Spiritual formation is concrete: one surrendered habit, not a vague intention.
- Drawing near in awe rather than carelessness is the goal of the whole passage (5:7).

Discussion Prompts

- Ask each person to name one of the three: a careless worship habit, an unkept word, or a rash promise.
- Discuss: how does drawing near to Christ change a distracted heart into a reverent one?
- Invite a single, specific commitment to surrender that habit to the Lord this week.