

ECCL. 4:1-12, PRINCIPLES OF COMPANIONSHIP

April 8, 1988

H. Van Dyke Parunak

A. Structural Overview

1. General nature of this portion of the book: relatively independent proverbial paragraphs, grouped according to common themes. (Maybe we'll discover more structure as we work through.)
2. 4:1-12, Interpersonal relations
He observes two evils of association with others, but then considers the alternative, and finally points out the true values of human companionship.
 - a) The evils of association: one imposed on us by others, the other self-imposed because of others.
 - 1) Oppression--They use us to advance their selfish ends.
 - 2) Envy--We drive ourselves batty trying to keep up with them.
 - b) The undesirable alternative: loneliness.
 - c) The true value of other people: Mutual Support.
3. 4:13-5:9, Authority (King and God)

B. 4:1-3, Oppression.

1. What is "oppression"?
 - a) Object is the poor and the stranger. Taking advantage of someone. Jer. 7:6, "stranger, orphan, widow," the canonical set of unprivileged people. Cf. Deut. 10:17-19, the Lord is their protector.
 - b) Often parallel to "steal," so motive is self-enrichment. Cf. 1 Sam. 12:3,4 (ruler who uses his authority to deprive the people--Dictators); Deut. 24:14,15 (withholding the hire of a poor servant).
 - c) Good example, though word is not used: Neh. 5.
 - d) Thus: to enrich myself at the expense of the poor and weak. There are two ways to prosper: fill people's needs, so that they want what I create and pay me for it, and use my power over them to take what they have. A narrow line between the two, but one that Christians must discern.
2. Relation of "comforter" to HS. This word in Gk. is very close to John 14:16, the one who stands by us when we are oppressed. Progressive revelation: Qohelet did not understand the indwelling ministry of the HS, as we do. In fact, our Lord's words suggest that this is a new ministry in this age.
3. Thus Qohelet sees no earthly ("under the sun") hope for oppression, and mourns over it.

C. 4:4-6, Envy

The argument is that caring what others think can drive us

to too much of a good thing (diligence). vv. 4 and 5 contrast excessive labor (from envy) with idleness (which is folly), and v.6 recommends the balance.

1. The evil effects of envy.

a) In KJV, labor *leads* to envy. In fact, the expression occurs only here, but *QIN)aH* usually takes subjective, not objective genitive, so just the opposite is the point: envy leads us to labor harder than we should. Replace "envied" with "envious" to get the meaning.

b) Example: 1 Kings 21, Ahab envies Naboth's vineyard and goes to excessive lengths (including murder) to get it.

c) NB: This is the engine that drives our capitalistic system. Need to recognize its danger and not succumb to it. Prov. 23:4, "Labor not to be rich." We must find our portion *in* our labor; we can never expect to find it *from* our labor.

2. Yet we must not suppose that we should not labor at all. It is the fool who sits idly by, destroying himself.

a) Folding hands, Prov. 6:10, so he can't work with them. See all of Prov. 6:6-11 for the point.

b) Eat flesh, Ps. 27:2. This is what an enemy does to us. To do it to oneself is to destroy oneself.

3. The balance, v.6. Cf. Prov. 30:7-9, "Give me neither poverty nor riches." 1 Tim. 6:6-10.

D. 4:7-8, Loneliness

In view of the dangers of oppression and envy, one might be tempted to think that it is better to be a hermit. Yet this is no better.

1. Consider a man with no family.

2. He works hard, and accumulates wealth.

3. Yet what will happen to it after he dies? KJV "neither" is not in text. He does ask the question, but without any answer.

E. 4:9-12, True Companionship

v.9 summarizes the point, which is demonstrated in three examples in the verses following. The examples give increasingly persuasive reasons that people need companionship.

1. v.9 summary: two have a good reward "in" (NOT "from") their labor. In the midst of all life's toil, a companion can help.

2. v.10, first example: personal failure.

a) Literal reference is to falling into a pit--a limestone sinkhole, perhaps, or an old cistern. No way out unless someone drops down a rope.

- b) Figurative reference: "fall" often emblematic of sin. Cf. James 5:19,20. We cannot recognize and correct all of our faults ourselves. We need the help of others, both to identify them and to remedy them.
 - c) But someone might say, "I don't fall. I've got my life under control. Therefore I don't need companionship." For such a person, we have the second example.
3. v.11, second example: stress of nature.
- a) Reference is to keeping warm on a cold night. Mountain climbers sleep close together to conserve body heat. Not a matter of personal failure, but just of the daily stresses of the world.
 - b) So we need one another just because of the discomforts of the world. It is not a failure to feel stressed by the world around us, but we still need the help of other believers to cope with it. Heb. 10:24,25.
 - c) Again, one might object, "I'm tough. I don't need that help." So we come to the third example.
4. v.12, third example: external opposition.
- a) Literal example: a bandit along the highway, overpowering the traveler.
 - b) Spiritual point: we are surrounded by spiritual foes who will seek to destroy us. Even if we have our own sin under control (which we do not), and even if we can stand natural stress (which is doubtful), we have to cope with deliberate, external opposition.
5. Threefold cord--why all of a sudden introduce a third? Perhaps Qohelet is pointing us toward the need for fellowship with God. A human friendship, reinforced by divine love, is unbreakable.
6. Application: We need one another in the church. Must cultivate and encourage our friendships with one another, and guard against sins that would sever us one from another.

F. Summary

- 1. Our association with other people can lead to problems, such as oppression and envy.
- 2. But loneliness is even worse.
- 3. God has given us companionship as a means of finding reward in the course of labor. We need one another, and we need to recognize our interdependency.