

Made for friendship

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[0 : 00] Well, can we turn again in our Bibles to the Old Testament wisdom book of Ecclesiastes in chapter 4, and we're going to read together from verse 7 to verse 16.

Let me apologize in advance for my throat, which is croaky and fading. We heard Keith read for us from John's Gospel, Jesus' invitation to friendship.

We're thinking about the reality that as people we are made for friendship, and here in chapter 4 our author introduces the theme of friendship to us. So Ecclesiastes 4 from verse 7 to verse 16.

Again, I saw something meaningless or something that is vanity under the sun. There was a man all alone. He had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. For whom am I toiling, he asked, and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment? This too is meaningless, a miserable business. Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. Better a pure but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning. The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. There was no end to all the people who were before them.

But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. So as we begin thinking about friendship, I want to introduce some thoughts that came from an Australian nurse called Bryona Ware, who had a blog a number of years ago that she turned into a book, a book that was called Five Regrets of the Dying. Maybe it's hard to see the connection between that and friendship, but two of the things that her patients identified as their biggest regrets are of relevance to us. And I hope in a way it will be a chance for us today to reflect on the path, the trajectory of our life now that we might not live with those same regrets. One regret, and this was especially true for her male patients from a previous generation, the regret, I wish I hadn't worked so hard. That regret of being stuck on the treadmill such that children growing up, a lot of the big events and moments were myths. That friendship with a wife, building relationships with the kids, absent. That was one big regret that she'd identified among her patients. And another, I wish I'd stayed in touch with my friends. Do we recognize that sense of being caught up in our own lives? Her patients did. They identified that, sort of pursuing, sort of personal goals, friendships lost along the way. And then when they were needed most, hard to make those connections, perhaps even hard to know where those former friends were living, not giving enough time and effort to friendship. Our teacher in Ecclesiastes 4 recognizes the limits of work and the values of friendship and God's word would want us to avoid those regrets. And so we read from verse 7 to verse 16 and probably we recognized those famous words in the center, verses 9 through 12. I often read, at weddings, two are better than one and the cord of three strands is not easily broken. Both pointing us towards the one basic truth that friendship is one of God's everyday gifts. Ecclesiastes is full of [4 : 37] God's everyday gifts and friendship is one of those, a gift to enjoy, a gift to invest in. And then J.C. Ryle was one among many. He was a bishop in Liverpool in a previous century. He said, friendship is that thing which halves our sorrows and doubles our joys. And to share life with another has that effect for us. We need our cord of three strands. We need friendship. We need relationship.

This week I was reading an article by a pastor in a house church in China, speaking after two years of pandemic, which was really intense in China, as I'm sure many of us know. But on top of that, the house church is, of course, persecuted by the government. And what was so striking about that

article was this pastor talking about how the church needed one another. There was an understanding that we together need the body of Christ. So we need to find ways, even when it's so difficult, to spend time together, to reconnect so that we can be doing all those one another's, love one another, serve, encourage, bear one another's burdens. And that made me think, is this a time for us, as we look towards the end of pandemic, to be reconnecting with one another, reconnecting with our friends, reconnecting as a fellowship, so that we are sharing our lives together. Because friendship's a wonderful gift, but we know too that friendship comes with challenges. There's an excellent book, *Made for Friendship*, written by Drew Hunter. He observes there are three barriers that we can probably recognize to friendship today. The first is busyness.

How many of us would identify as being time poor? This becomes a real challenge as well, I think, when culturally it's almost a badge of honor. You know, who doesn't say that we're crazy busy all the time? And in that kind of context, it's really easy for friendship to be pushed to one side. We get our diaries together, and I'll see you in sort of three months' time. It's not conducive to establishing good friendships. So busyness is a challenge. Technology is a challenge too, isn't it?

There are gifts to technology. But one of the things that technology does is it gives us more connections, but more shallow connections. It means it's very easy for us to be disengaged from real life and from real people. So we're typing rather than having face-to-face connections. You know, we have enjoyed the benefit of technology as a church, but there's a danger as well that we lose the privilege and the priority of fellowship together. We need real church. We need real people. We need to be a real body. So that's a challenge. And another challenge and a barrier that Drew Hunter recognizes is that of mobility, by which he means that as people we move around a lot more than previous generations. This is undoubtedly true in a city like Edinburgh.

[8 : 04] How many of us have moved here in the last five to ten years for work or for study? We don't perhaps have deep roots here. We perhaps think of somewhere else as home. And one of the challenges then for friendship is because we know that it takes time to develop friendships and we think we're just here for a little while, we might think, well, why bother establishing friendships if we're just going to go back and do something else? And that can be really tricky for us to navigate as Christians because we know that we need fellowship. We need the body of Christ. We need to be part of a local church. So how do we navigate that? And so I hope as we spend some time together and we think about the wisdom of our teacher, it will help us to avoid some of those regrets and to remind us why friendship is better than friendship. So some wisdom from our teacher. The first piece of wisdom is simply that two are better than one. We find that in verse nine. But on either side of that, there are two pictures, two people in view. Now verse seven and eight, we are presented with a workaholic. There was a man all alone. He had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.

Here is a man working by himself and for himself. He has no time for relationships, no time for his relatives. Perhaps he has cut himself off from his family in order to get ahead in his work. This is a person for whom loneliness is no accident but has been caused by deliberate choice where work is coming first. This is a man who's stuck in a vicious cycle. He's working but he's not finding contentment. He's not finding joy because he's never got enough money. So that drives him to make more. There is high cost but no ultimate gain. Samuel Johnson said, to be unhappy at home is the ultimate result of all ambition. It's the picture of Ecclesiastes 4.

To put finance over family and friends. To pursue competition over cooperation. To sacrifice everything to the God of success. It's what we find here in Ecclesiastes 4 and we find a man who is alone and he is miserable and he's not found lasting gain.

And then the other picture, verse 13 to 16, we've got a tale of two kings and we especially think about the older foolish king. But this tale of two kings, this comparison, let's read again. Verse 13, better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning.

[11 : 09] And in part, this story is told to remind us of the limits of work advancement and finding ultimate gain. Promotion is not going to lead to eternal satisfaction. Driving home the point that we've seen earlier in the book, don't overwork, don't make work an idol. The picture that we're painted perhaps reminds some of us of the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis. Joseph was a man who was languishing in a prison but was then raised to be almost like a king, second only to Pharaoh in Egypt.

Joseph was a man to whom the whole world came, recognized his wisdom, then came for his food. But in the end, the story of Exodus tells us a future Pharaoh forgot Joseph. That's the reality facing us all.

But the contrast as it comes to friendship is that the poor but wise youth is better than the old but foolish king. Why? Because one listens to others and the old man refuses to heed the warning of others.

He's become stubborn and he's keeping his own counsel. He's working and living in his own little bubble. So our workaholic and our foolish king, they share this sense of being alone, having no friend with them, to have no second. I'm not really sure why but this week as I was thinking about this, these two stories, I was thinking about dueling. If you've read books and movies, read, watch movies that are set in the Victorian era. You may have seen some duel scenes. And the second in the world of dueling, which wasn't just fiction but was fact, a second, a friend, was really important. That second had the job of looking to defend the honor of one party that was called to the duel. They would also seek peace to try and spare life. And they would also serve as kind of protection to avoid any ambush or unfair play. When it came to a duel, you needed a second. You needed a friend when you went into that intense situation. Do we have a friend who has our back?

[13:49] Two are better than one. We actually see this all over the New Testament. We read a couple of weeks ago the parable of the rich fool had a great harvest, decided to pull down his barn to build a bigger barn so he could store up all this stuff for himself so he could sit back and enjoy all of his wealth, never care about God, never care about others, and he was called a fool. Perhaps we know the story of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a tax collector who had isolated himself in society because he'd become overly greedy, taking more than he should have, and he was hated by the people around him. But when Jesus came to his house, when God's gift of salvation came to his heart, he is reunited to society and he becomes exceedingly generous.

Two are better than one. When Jesus sent the disciples out, how did he send them? He sent them in pairs. He sent them two by two. You read the book of Acts, read how the early church lived, and you find a community that read God's word together, that they listened to the apostles' teaching together, they prayed together, they shared food together, they shared the resources together, because two are better than one.

So if two are better than one, we are not to go it alone. We are to put love your neighbor into practice.

We are to seek to have a friend and to be a friend to others. Because we recognize, don't we, that we will all have times in our life when we will go through struggles and we will go through trouble. Whether that's in work, whether that's in relationship, whether that's with our health, whether that's with faith. And so we need to be investing in friendships so that we have that support for when those moments come.

We need fellowship to help us, and so that we can help others. Since these stories bring us back to the workplace, there is an encouragement to seek cooperation, which can be very counter-cultural, when we're encouraged towards competition.

[16:21] We're also being encouraged towards contentment. And not to keep chasing after more and more wealth, recognizing that the value of life is found in friendship more than in finance.

And for our faith, there is that call to pursue Christian friendship. Christian friendship. Someone who will share the journey with us.

Christian life is often described as pilgrimage. We don't pilgrimage by ourselves, we walk alongside others. Perhaps it's a time for us to remind ourselves again that fellowship and public worship and spending time with God's people are God's means of grace for us.

Because two are better than one. And then let's think some more about that central section, verses 9 to 12. Recognizing this wisdom that we are made for friendship.

That verse 9 begins with a very simple comparison. comparison. Comparisons where X is better than Y. Two are better than one. And then it goes on because they have a good return for their labor.

[17:45] You hear good return and you hear labor. And maybe instinctively we're thinking economics. We're thinking productivity. We're thinking profit margins. But instead, what do we get?

Two are better than one because they give help for the journey. And the picture moves towards the traveler and towards the pilgrim.

So actually, these little verses give us a little window into a journeying in the Middle East thousands of years ago. And three dangers are identified.

Three dangers that can be avoided if we have a friend with us. First danger. The danger of falling into a pit.

or falling and being injured. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.

[18 : 48] Friendship is good because it offers help. the next danger facing a traveler. What happens when you're out in the desert and there's no hostel to be found and you find yourself sleeping under the stars?

Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? There's the danger of exposure. being met by having someone to share body heat with.

Another danger that these travelers would meet and it's one actually that Jesus identifies in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Remember the parable of the man who's going down on his journey and he gets attacked by robbers?

Well, we find it here in verse 12. Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. To have a friend is to have a source of protection.

So, here the good return is investing in friendship so that we know by experience two are better than one.

[20 : 05] Now, we think about good returns and we understand that there is a cost and we know that there is a cost to building and maintaining friendship. It takes time and as we've said we are often time poor or at least we think we are.

There is a cost in establishing friendships because there is of necessity a loss of independence. It's not just about my needs and my priorities and life doesn't go according to my speed and to my timetable.

So, there is always a cost in building friendships. Perhaps there is an awkwardness. How do I make that approach? How do we move forward?

But, the Bible would say it's worth every cost because then you go through life not alone but with others. Think about what J.C.

Ryle said, friendship is that thing that halves our sorrows and doubles our joys. Think about the words, pictures here in Ecclesiastes 4. We find ourselves in trouble.

[21 : 19] Friendship means help. Who hasn't experienced the warmth of time with friends and family?

How good it is to make time with the people that we care about and who care about us? To have someone who we know has our back, it's a good thing and we know it is a good thing.

Perhaps we can think of the buddy system. Some of us in school have maybe come across that.

Maybe if we go climbing we've come across it, two people paired together, working as one, looking to look out for one another, to monitor the progress of one another.

That's not just wisdom for the playground or for the mountaintop. That's wisdom for life. That we don't go it alone. As Christians our faith is not private and privatised.

We are made for friendship, we are made for fellowship. And because that is true, because two are better than one and because a cord of three strands is not quickly broken, we need to invest and prioritise.

[22 : 40] And we need to look to see how can I break down those barriers to building friendship. So think about our attitude towards busyness.

Maybe for some of us we need to disconnect from work so there are times when we are fully present with the people that we love, the people who are present with us.

and that's really hard when we can be spending a lot of time working from home. Perhaps we need to get out our diaries and begin to reprioritise so that we make room and we are connecting with old friends as restrictions continue to ease.

Perhaps we need to think about our attitude to church, not church as a building that we come to, but as a people that we are committed to. God demands that he be number one in our lives, in our priorities.

Jesus says, if you love me, you'll love my church. What needs to change so that we're showing that in our everyday life?

[23 : 55] What about when it comes to our use of technology? technology? Is it important that we cut down some of our social media connection in favour of real face-to-face communion with people?

Perhaps when we're with our friends, it's the time to leave our phones at home, or at least to leave them in our pockets, to switch off our notifications so that we're actually in the room with the people we're in the room with.

I think it's something we need to fight against. And then when it comes to the reality of us being much more mobile and maybe feeling less rooted, it's that important thing of looking both ways, to make effort with old friends, but also pursuing real friendships now, not putting it off and saying, well, in five years' time when I've got that job and I'm in that place, then I'll put down roots.

No, we need them now. God's Word says we need church, we need people today. The Bible is full of that teaching, isn't it, to love our neighbour.

And that in itself becomes a call to friendship. And that becomes a mindset shift where we're thinking about we, not just thinking about me, because we are made for friendship.

[25 : 18] And do you know we can see that as we think about the storyline of the Bible? we go back to creation. Indeed, before the world was created, we know that there was God, a God who is an eternal fellowship of perfect friendship, love, communion, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And that God made the world so that we could live in the overflow of His love so that we might enjoy the privilege of fellowship, friendship with Him.

we go to creation, go to the Garden of Eden, what do we find? We find there is God, as it were, walking and talking with Adam and Eve. We find from the beginning that we were made for friendship with God, made in the image of God to know and enjoy and worship Him.

And then God said in His perfect world there was one thing that was not good, it was not good when Adam was alone, because we were made for friendship with God and others.

Staying in the Garden of Eden, what happened when Adam and Eve fell into sin is that they turned their back on God, rejecting friendship with God, so that they might live like God and be self-sufficient, not needing His friendship anymore.

[26 : 44] anymore. So when they had fallen into sin and God came to speak with them in the garden, they are then hiding behind the tree. Friendship, fellowship has been broken because of sin and they're sent out of God's place, sent east of Eden and friendship is lost because of sin.

That's what sin does, it separates. But that's not the end of the story. Then we have this wonderful theme of covenant within the Bible, this idea that God in His grace and mercy, not because we deserve it, but because God is good and kind.

He pursues His people. He reverses that curse. He redeems people. He restores people to fellowship with Himself. He enters into friendship with people and He does that ultimately by sending Jesus.

Jesus who is God and man and He is the perfect friend. He enjoys perfect fellowship with His Father, living for His glory and pursuing obedience always.

And He's a wonderful friend, doesn't He? Read the Gospels. He's a wonderful friend to the disciples, to those who are helpless, to those who are lost. And Jesus, the God man, then goes to the cross to bear the curse for our disobedience, for our saying no to friendship with God, for us turning our back on God the Father.

[28 : 21] And He dies to restore His people to relationship with God so that we can be friends of God. Jesus is the friend we need above all others.

that's why we read from John 15, Jesus said, greater love has no one than this, that He lays down His life for His friends.

Jesus didn't say it, He did it. There on the cross, He did it. He said, I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master's business.

Instead, I have called you friends. Jesus comes to invite us to friendship and to have friendship with Jesus now today is to find the best friend of all.

One who will be there for every journey that life takes us on. One who promises to be there for His people every time we fall.

[29 : 25] One who warms us by His love. One who protects us in His strong grip. He is the one friend we will find who is never too distracted to spend time with us.

He's never too busy for us. He's never out of reach from us. Ecclesiastes reminds us that friendship, friendship with one another, friendship with God, is the supreme pleasure of life. It's something that we were made for. It was Charles Spurgeon, famous, Baptist preacher from London, who said that to be happy here, we need to have friends.

So let's remind one another that we would be pursuing friendships, that we would be prioritizing people, that we'd be investing in fellowship in the church.

But Spurgeon also said to be happy for eternity, we need to find a friend in Jesus. Ecclesiastes keeps speaking to us about life under the sun, which is a time marker, which is speaking to us of the reality of death and eternity to come.

[30 : 50] And when we think about the reality of death, we recognize that as the end to a friendship, friendship, and that is the great sorrow and the great burden we face, the great longing in our hearts is that we would find a friend and that friend would last forever.

Do you know Ecclesiastes tells us God has set eternity in our hearts, he's given us that longing and that longing is met when Jesus is our friend, when our faith is in him. and in the work of Jesus dying and rising to pay for our sin and to give us salvation, in his work we find eternal gain, that trusting in Jesus we have that promise of eternal friendship with all who have ever loved Jesus in the past, and eternal friendship and fellowship with Jesus himself.

To our better than one, and especially when the one is Jesus. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we give you thanks that from the beginning of creation you recognized and you said that it was not good for a man to be alone, for a person to be alone, that you made us for friendship. We thank you for the friends and the family that you have given to us, and we ask that you would help us to be good friends.

[32 : 35] We all know the challenge that there has been over the last couple of years because of restrictions and lockdowns and getting used to meeting and spending time virtually and digitally rather other than face to face.

But Lord, we pray that you would help us to pursue friendship, to make time for others to share the sorrows and the joys of others.

Lord, we pray that you would remind us that it's not good for us to be alone when it comes to our faith also, people, that you would connect us deeply to Christian friendship and fellowship and to public worship so that we can find help and strength and encouragement, that we can be doing all those one another's, that we can be showing love.

And we also remember the importance in your wisdom of the Christian church and the Christian family giving a picture of your great love to the world.

By this all men will know that you are my disciples, Jesus said, if you have love for one another.

That requires us to be together. And so we pray that you would strengthen our fellowship, increase our unity.

[34 : 04] Lord, we pray for those who are particularly lonely today, in our church, in our family, in our community.

We know that there are many. We know that life is hard, that the last two years have been so hard for many people. And so we pray for comfort.

And we pray that you would grant to us wisdom to know how to reach out to others, how to sacrifice time and our own independence for the good of others.

But we also pray most of all that in people's loneliness there would be an understanding that you have given Jesus to be a friend who will always stick by his people so that people might turn to him.

Lord, we also continue to think about the situation in the Ukraine. We think about the sadness of families being separated because of war, some staying and some fleeing, some fighting and some running for shelter.

[35 : 20] people are going to be a father. Lord, we pray that you would spare life, that you would in the fullness of time restore families.

Lord, we pray that you would in your mercy and in your wisdom, that you would intervene to stop evil plans and evil purposes.

Lord, that the influence of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, would be powerfully felt. Lord, again, we thank you for your church in Ukraine. We pray for them today, asking that they would have an opportunity to worship in peace and in freedom.

Lord, help them to persevere, help them to love their neighbours well and Lord, even help your people to love their enemies. Lord, we pray for those who can't meet and who can't worship because they don't have freedom and they don't have peace and they face persecution, not just in Ukraine but all around the world.

Father, sometimes we take those things so for granted. We pray for those who don't have that luxury asking that you would draw near, thanking you that you continue to build your church and that no empire and no hostile purpose will ever prevail over your church.

[36 : 50] So we pray that you would be with us in this day and in this new week. We ask that you would give us wisdom, wisdom to know how to live at work and in our families and with our friends so that we might live for your glory.

We pray in Jesus' name. God bless you. God bless you.

God bless you. God bless you. God bless you. He will forgive you. God bless you. God bless you.