

Ecclesiastes 4:1-12 “Coherence for a Fragmented World”

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Preacher: Joey Royal

[0 : 00] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah.

! It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian, checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me actually to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

Let's pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

You may be seated. So, George, the usual preacher, has been preaching on Ecclesiastes for the last few weeks, and I've been learning a lot, getting a lot from it, and a lot of things have stuck out for me from what he's been teaching us, what the Lord has been teaching us through him, more like.

[1 : 51] But one thing he said, I think it was last week, he said, we should think of Ecclesiastes, the book, as a sort of thought experiment. It's a thought experiment where we look at the world under the sun.

That's the expression, under the sun. Which is another way of saying we are seeing the world in Ecclesiastes stripped of any unifying principle.

And so it's a world where everything feels like vapor, everything feels fragmented, everything looks broken. Now, that sounds pretty bleak. Why is that in the Bible? Isn't the Bible like a religious book that gives us encouraging little tidbits? No. I mean, sometimes I can do that, but that's not really what the Bible is.

The Bible, because it is the Word of God, is bigger than the world, and so it has everything in it. And so it even has this in it. But it's for a specific purpose. And the specific purpose, I think, is that this fragmented, vaporous, broken world is the world most people experience day by day.

And it's maybe the world you experience right now. This is maybe what the world looks like and feels like to you. I've seen this world. I've experienced this world. It's like staring into an abyss.

[3 : 21] A fragmented, broken, vaporous world. So that's the thought experiment. And so the preacher, the writer, is challenging us with the question, what is it that holds life together?

Like, what keeps this world from being just a bunch of broken pieces? What's the unifying principle underlying it all? That's the question.

And the preacher is going to show us now that when God's Word is obscured, when you don't see that unifying principle, don't know that unifying principle, we'll say more about that in a minute, but when that happens, three distinct, what I'm going to call patterns of disintegration become visible.

That's what this text says. Three distinct patterns of disintegration become visible. And it's visible in the sphere of the government, the sphere of the economy, and the sphere of our personal relationships.

So we're going to look at some brokenness in the government, the economy, and our relationships. And then we're going to ask about this unifying principle that keeps this place from collapsing into chaos.

[4 : 34] So first, the preacher wants to talk about oppression, which I said is sort of a collapse of governing structures, ruling structures, governments. And so in oppression, when someone's oppressed, they lose agency. And so the preacher's looking out at the world, he sees the tears of the oppressed. He sees no comforter. He sees power entirely on side of the oppressor.

And he sees victims of oppression stripped of agency. They can't choose to be free. There's a powerlessness there. That's what I mean, stripped of agency. You can't choose on your own to fix that. Now, when we think about oppression, that word, we might think about sort of tyrannical governments, authoritarian governments, somewhere else. But any broken institution can embody that brokenness, can show us pieces of that brokenness. And so there are degrees of severity, but if you're stuck and you can't will yourself out, you're oppressed. You are experiencing oppression.

And you're hindered in your ability to choose freedom. You are not free. We are not free. And the conclusion here in this first bit, the conclusion the preacher comes to is chilling.

Like, you don't even hear this from the most hardened atheist. So here it is. It's better to not be born. Like, if this is all there is, it's better to not be born. I mean, you get some real hardcore atheists that call themselves anti-natalists, and they believe that. And they like going on message boards online and writing books of despair and whatever. But he's saying, hey, you know what?

If this is all there is, yeah, they're probably right. If this is all there is, then life is fundamentally chaotic, with no underlying principle of unity.

[6 : 55] And so his conclusion reveals something really troubling here. It's not that when you look at the world you're seeing, oh, a problem there, a broken relationship there, a broken thing there.

What's being revealed here is that the brokenness goes all the way down. It's a structural break in the world, which is what the Bible means when it says the power of death. It's a structural break in the world all the way down. Cheerful book, right? Let's see, this isn't the whole picture. We're going to get somewhere here. And so the claim here underlying this is that death has inflicted a profound structural break. And I don't know what metaphor you want to use, but it's tipped the world off its axis, or it's broken things, cracked the foundation, whatever, but it's all the way down.

Now, here's an example. So your car is, you take it into the shop, it's all rusty, and you're not going to say like this great powerful force called rust took over my car.

You're going to say, no, the chemical composition, you're not going to say this, but you're going to think this, the chemical composition of my car is breaking down. That's what rust is. That's what death is in creation. It's the structural composition of the world breaking down. That's death. And the devil and sin latch onto that and derive whatever, I don't want to say power, because it's really an anti-power, but make life miserable and fragmented and broken. But death goes all the way down.

So there's oppression. Okay? You see that in oppressive power structures, governments. You see these structures beholden to death, and people lose agency. So that's the first sort of figure or picture or image is oppression. It's the breakdown of government. Next one is he wants to talk about futile labor. And here you have a failure of purpose, and here I'm saying this is sort of an economic structural break, if you want to call it that. So here's the broken pattern here, the broken picture. You work hard, and you wake up one morning and think, what's this all for? What am I doing?

[9 : 33] Like, is there any purpose here? Is there any meaning to this? That feeling he calls futility. It's this feeling that I work hard, I'm sweating, I'm stressed, I'm whatever, and there's, I don't know what the purpose of this is. I don't know. And when I die, maybe it won't matter at all.

The preacher tells us here that one of the drivers of this feeling of futility in work is envy.

Envy is, I want something that you have, and I'm bitter and unhappy because you have it and I don't. That's envy. And so he's a very keen observer of human nature, and he knows that a lot of the time we don't just work to live to get our basic needs. We often work to outdo our neighbor, to outdo the other person. We want to be smarter, richer, more powerful, have a bigger paycheck, have nicer, newer things. Or at least we don't want to be worse. We don't want to be worse than our neighbor, even if we don't want to be better off. He says it's futile. What's that for? What's the underlying principle of unity, of integrity to that? What's that for?

Now, I don't want to get the wrong idea. The preacher here is not like a Marxist or an anarchist or something. He's saying, rip down, you know, rip down the current system and we'll build a new one and that'll be better. No, that's futile too. That's going to break.

It's like, that's like saying, hey, the foundation on my house is cracked, so I'll take the top level off and do the renovation. No, no. No, no. No, the break goes all the way down. And so what he's saying here ultimately is that all human effort driven by envy is futile. A lot of human effort is that. It's a desperate spiral. And you might think, well, okay, then I'll withdraw and I'll just not participate in that whole system. Yeah, that's futile too. He says the person who's a fool who sits, folds his hands is no better off. There's no passive escape from this kind of futility.

[12 : 20] It's broken all the way down. And so whether it's hard work or passive withdrawal, the pattern of human labor is broken all the way down. So we got broken governments, broken systems, you know, broken economy, work is broken. And then next he wants to talk about broken relationships.

So this is the loss of communion, not holy, like communion being deep relationship we need, of which holy communion is the most central. So the picture here is there's a worker who has achieved success according to the world's terms and got a big house and big bank account and nice clothes and good reputation. And you know what? Their family doesn't remember what they look like.

That too is futile. If your work costs you all your relationships, what does he say? All alone, no son nor brother.

The community, human community, family, you've seen it. You've seen it. Disintegration before the pressures of the world. Our own achievements actually end up isolating us. Sometimes the worst thing you can get is what you want. Our own achievements isolate ourselves and trap us in the fragmented futility of the world.

So it's all broken. Like all the way down to the foundational level of creation. And it's expressed in governments, it's expressed in the economy, it's expressed in community.

[14 : 27] Broken, fragmented, futile. The end. No. But where do we go from here? What now? What do you do when it's broken all the way down?

Well, here's some what I think are flawed answers that Christians have proposed. One is, let's be, let's be escapists. So let's say, yeah, life is broken. This is an accurate depiction of the world. But don't worry. We believe in Jesus. He's going to take us out of this place and we can watch the whole thing burn. Well, I mean, there's some truth to that. Okay.

Jesus does promise eternal life. That's a promise more precious than anything. That's true. But in saying that, we devalue the world God has made.

If we focus only on escape from the world, then yeah, it really is futile. And there's nothing left but to get out. But see, the Bible gives us a bigger, a fuller, a more hopeful picture than that. Way bigger than that. Way bigger than that. So the escapist route, I don't think, is the way to go.

The other one that Christians often do, and this is probably more common you're going to hear now in the church, is the activist. Who says, yes, life is broken.

[16 : 06] That's true. But we've got to fix it. So let's advocate for more just political arrangements and organize protests and advance this cause and that cause and shame this person and, you know, whatever. Vote this way, whatever.

We're going to fix it. And if we can work together, we're going to fix this problem of futility and brokenness in the world. And again, there's some truth to that. God cares deeply about justice. God wants us to care deeply about justice.

But the problem isn't fixed. Why? Because we're sinners. And that means that the problem isn't just out there. The problem's in here, which means I'm complicit in the problem.

So how can I, who am complicit in the problem, fix the problem out there? The other thing is, when you go down this path of the activist, we're going to fix the world, you're going to find that our efforts fail, chaos overwhelms us, and you fall into despair.

We can't fix the world. It's not just a few bad events. It's a break all the way down. And so what we're seeing in this chapter of Ecclesiastes, the government economy relationships, we're seeing these patterns of disintegration that prove the structural integrity of the world has collapsed.

[17 : 41] All the way down. And death has broken it. All the way down. And sin and the devil exploit that brokenness and pull us deeper into it.

So we can't fix the world. We can't fix the brokenness of creation. Our good intentions are not enough. Our willpower is not enough. There's no, we can't escape it.

We live here. God's given us this world. We live here. God's given us these bodies. This community. We live here. So where do we go from here? The preacher gives a hint.

At the end, he says, two are better than one. And a cord with three strands is not easily broken. So he says that at the end of this diagnosis of the world's structural damage.

Here's at least what he means by that. He at least means that any coherence you're going to find is not going to be found in you.

[18 : 47] It's going to be found in someone else. The answer is not inside you. The answer is not in escape. The answer is not in trying harder.

The answer is in someone else. But who? John 1, the Gospel of John, starts out with very famous, you probably know this, these verses.

In the beginning was the Word, the Logos. That's a Greek word for word. The Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And then further down it says, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The someone else is the Word made flesh. That's the someone else. Now think about that for a minute. What John is saying there, and it's not just John.

I mean, it's in Paul says this too. It's in lots of places. What's being said here is that, okay, God made the world, this world, by His Word.

[19 : 58] And that same Word, which is fully God, has become human and lived with us. I mean, another way to say that is the structural pattern through which, by which God made the world has a face.

And a name. And I'll tell you this name today. It's the most precious name in the world. The name of the structural pattern of the universe that has a face is Jesus Christ.

That's the name. And Jesus doesn't just send us a memo with some good ideas. Nor does He cheer from the sidelines saying, you can do it.

You can fix it. No, what Jesus does is enters the brokenness of the world and gives Himself utterly, completely, and subjects Himself to the brokenness of the world.

And by entering fully into death all the way down, He destroys death at the root. He undoes the fragmentation of the universe and He's restoring it to its original coherence.

[21 : 16] Because if the brokenness is all the way down, then the someone else has got to go all the way down to deal with it right there at the root. Now, okay, this is maybe a little bit of an idiosyncratic way of expressing this, but we say this more or less when we confess the creed.

So, in the Apostles' creed, say, but also the others, we confess Jesus Christ was crucified, He died, and was buried. And again, not just an idea, that's a real descent of the Word of God through which the world was made, made flesh, submitted to death.

And by entering the deepest level of this brokenness, He has undone the patterns of disintegration.

So, oppression. Was Jesus oppressed? Yeah. Yeah, was He ever. I mean, the full overwhelming power of the state, the religious authorities, the crushing weight of the law, the Old Testament law, the curse of the law, stripped of all agency and power to death.

He went all the way down into oppression, all the way down. How about the futility of work? Yeah. His ministry was His work, and it seemed to end in utter defeat.

[22 : 45] Rejected, scorned, condemned, betrayed, denied. The people that were supposed to be there with Him, scattered. And so, the cross looks like all His righteous efforts are futile and defeated.

And so, He goes all the way down into the futility of work, to the place where all purpose looks lost. All the way down. Loneliness.

Was He lonely? Abandoned? Yeah. Yes. I mentioned already the betrayals and the scorn and the condemnation and the rejection and the scattering. And, I mean, He's alone.

Yes, there's a couple there. Yeah. But, and what does He say from the cross? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Like, that is to stare into the abyss.

God forsakenness? That's all the way down. And so, what's happening is Jesus is embracing these patterns of disintegration and reversing them in His body.

[24 : 01] Dealing with the anti-power of death at the root by going all the way down. But, of course, if He just went all the way down, He can relate to us, I suppose. But what good is that?

No, He's come all the way back up. Right? I mean, the resurrection means death couldn't hold Him. It means that His intervention is successful. It means that the structural integrity of the world is resolved, is reversed.

The break is mended. Now, does it look like it all the time? Not yet. Not yet. But it's moving that way. And there will be a day where it will be complete.

That work will be complete. So, Jesus has turned oppression into participation. So, He's the crucified King. And it doesn't mean that experiences of oppression aren't painful.

But it means they're meaningful. They're participation in the solution Christ brings. Futile labor turns into rest and purpose. Jesus' work is complete.

[25 : 05] His sacrifice is effective. It worked. It worked. Your work can't be futile. My work cannot be futile. All the purposes that we lack in our self-generated striving is redeemed in His effective sacrifice on the cross and resurrection.

You don't need envy. You've got Jesus. Right? So, we're released. You're released from the burden to justify yourself.

You don't need to find ultimate meaning in your work. You can find ultimate meaning in Jesus' work. You can rest. You can rest. Loneliness becomes communion.

Embodied communion. Of course, Jesus didn't stay buried. And He's at the right hand of the Father, ruling in authority. And He sent the Holy Spirit. And He's gathered us.

Which means if you're here, you're here because the Holy Spirit sent you. You might have got out of bed and thought, should I go or not? But, no.

[26 : 16] You're here because the Holy Spirit is pulling you together. Pulling us together in the love of Christ. That's why everybody's part of a church. Or you're looking for something.

You don't know it yet, but the Holy Spirit's speaking to you. Drawing you. Pulling you. And we're going to celebrate communion here in a moment.

Or a few moments, I guess. And what I'm talking about, the structural integrity of the world being reversed, being fulfilled, being completed, being fixed.

In Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. The scriptures everywhere talk about that, describe that. And communion, when we do it, makes that visible. So, does the world feel incoherent to you?

What we're doing right there in a minute? And Jesus died and risen and offers himself to us? Ah, that's the coherence of the world.

[27 : 14] That is what you're looking for. That is the only coherence you will ever find. Praise be to God for sending his Son and his Spirit.

because that is the only hope and the only coherence we can ever find. But it's real. It's real. Let's hold on to that. Amen? Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.