

Independence or In Dependence?

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[0 : 00] Well, we've been with the teacher the last few weeks on his search for something lasting and something ultimate under the sun, that is the world that we live in, and we've heard his shocking discovery.

A breath, a breath, everything is a breath. Here and now, the good, the bad, and the ugly, he says, is like a breath on a cold day.

It's there, it fades, it's gone. Try to catch it, you can't. So what's it all for? Is there a wise way to live when our lives are a breath?

Well, he's given us two touchstones so far, two points of contact to come back to when we're not sure what it is we're living for. Firstly, fear God.

Fear God who created you and who isn't a breath, who is eternal, who is at work in our world, who is at work in our lives. And secondly, enjoy life while you have it, before it fades, before it goes.

[1 : 14] Enjoy it while it's here. Give thanks to God for it. Fear God and enjoy life. Those have been our two touchstones so far in this book. But is that it for the rest of the book?

Does it have anything else to say to us? Well, tonight in chapter 4, the teacher turns his question 90 degrees and asks not, what is it for?

But who is it for? It's the same search, but now in a different light. Just see that in verse 8. 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 asks. There's our question, who's it all for? And why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?

The teacher will say this evening, there are really only two whos to live for. Either I live for me, or I live for we.

[2 : 10] Either I live independently of others, chasing my own good and my own gain, or I live independence on others, chasing their good, relying on them for my good and my gain.

And really his point tonight is that living for me is foolishness. Living for us is wisdom. And firstly then, let's just see the foolishness of living for me, myself, and I.

And now for us to see this me-centered life in color, we really need to go back to verse one of this chapter. Ecclesiastes is less of a neat and tidy book than other books of the Bible.

The teacher's thoughts kind of overlap in places. And so while the first few verses we saw last time do carry on the theme of injustice and oppression, they also kind of flow into this chapter and his thinking about who it is we live for.

And one of the clues is in verse three, Luke. So four times he's going to say in this chapter, one thing is better than another. And there's the first, better than both, the living and the dead, he says, is the one who's never been born.

[3 : 32] Now, you'll remember that that is in the context of a world where neither the oppressed nor the oppressors have a comforter. Because we saw while the oppressors destroy others first, they too are destroyed in the process.

In the race to develop nuclear weapons in the 50s and 60s, the world reached a tipping point beyond which experts said if these nuclear weapons were actually used, no one would survive.

They called it mutually assured destruction, which they shortened appropriately to its initials MAD. MAD. MAD. And that's the world that we live in, says the teacher, with or without nuclear warheads.

MAD. Mutually assured destruction. That's life under the sun. That's what living for you, living for me, myself, and I at its most extreme gets us.

Using others for my own personal good and gain, whatever it costs them. But know for sure, he says, that you will be destroyed in the process.

[4 : 47] But what if we just ratchet down living for me just a notch? Does that change anything? Is it better? Well, it's not, the teacher says.

If oppression is destroying others first and being destroyed in the process, well, then rivalry or envy is destroying myself first and others in the process.

So this is verses 4, 5, and 6. I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. So no one there is setting out, are they, to oppress or to use anyone else.

But it's still me against the world. I'm still driven by this basic opposition between me and the person next to me, one person's envy of another.

That is what drives me through life. They are living the dream. Their house must be beautiful, peaceful, full of life, fill in the blank.

[5 : 52] What could it be? Their work must be, what, important, fulfilling, lucrative, fill in the blank. Their days must be filled with, what, relaxation, laughter, friends, opportunity, freedom, fill in the blank.

Could be anything. They're living the dream. How can I get what they have or be part of what they're part of? Or better still, how can I one-up them in some way?

What do I have to do for me to have a life as good as, if not better than, that person? Now, even if you've never thought that thought to yourself consciously or never said those words out loud, can you hear the hum of that engine within you, whirring away this evening?

How often do we compare our lives to the lives of others and let those comparisons control our desires and emotions and decisions? The people who created the apps on your phone, they didn't do it to help you keep in touch with the people you love.

You know that. The apps on your phone were created to sell you a vision of the good life by showing you what everyone else wants you to think that their life is really like. That is what influencers get paid to do.

[7 : 17] The clue is in the name, isn't it? And I know, I know, you say, but you still keep on scrolling, don't you? And what do you do then? You go out and you get the smashed avocado.

And you get the latte art coffee, don't you? And you sit and you take a picture of it. And then you put your picture up so everyone else can see that that's the life that you have. And they must want that for themselves.

Even if you can't really afford it. And actually, you really prefer bacon rolls. But you go out, you do it. And then your picture that costs 20 pounds in a morning to curate and to put online, what does it do?

It slips down the feed into oblivion. And then you have to go and do it all again. Why do we live like that?

The teacher knows, verse 4. He knows that social media runs on this powerful but ugly force in the human heart. One person's envy of another.

[8 : 16] That's what it feeds on. And we keep coming back to feed it, don't we? Maybe it fuels our dissatisfaction with our own lives, but we can't get enough. Or maybe you've taken the highest paying job that you can.

You took all the promotions. You moved companies to afford the best house that you could, the best holidays that you could. Because you know that people in your position, from your background, with your circle, that's the kind of house that we have.

That's the kind of holidays we should want. How many of us have ever said no to more money, even if it actually diminished our quality of life?

And it's not only out there, is it? It's not only during the week. We know that this is not what church is for, don't we? But in our hearts, do we never turn church into a beautiful life contest?

Who do you want to be able to stand next to you or speak to this Sunday and not feel inferior? Brothers and sisters, let us not become conceited, provoking and envying one another, says Paul.

[9 : 35] Why does he say that? He says it because living for me, myself, and I in opposition to others, it can creep into every relationship, can't it? Every relationship, even a church family like this.

Friends, when life becomes a competition, no one is the winner. We are all losers. There's a reason that we call jealousy a green-eyed monster, because it will consume us all if we let it.

Now, verses 5 and 6 illustrate three ways to deal with that engine running in our hearts. Okay, the first, he says, is to switch it off completely.

Look, fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. What's he saying? The fool taps out of the contest by tapping out of relationships completely.

He doesn't reply to messages. She's not seen so much at church. It's me, myself, and I with my arms folded. If I can't win the game of life, I'm not playing.

[10 : 33] It's me out. But that, he says, is a path to ruin. Literally, he says, they eat their own flesh. It's a graphic description.

The teacher warns, if they don't uncross their arms and reach out soon, their body might just waste away. But doing the opposite, he says, is just as self-destructive.

Filling up the tank, putting your foot down on the accelerator, tearing through life, desperately trying to win. Two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. Now, that looks like the opposite, doesn't it, of verse 5?

But two handfuls of toil is just as pointless and ruinous as sitting with your arms folded, says the teacher. The only difference is you're wearing yourself out doing it, chasing the wind.

So, do you see, living for me, myself, and I can drive you off a cliff of despair or exhaustion, of loneliness or weariness.

[11 : 35] So, see the wisdom in what he's saying in the middle. Living for me, whether by doing nothing or by doing everything, it's a fool's game. But here's our second better look. Better one handful with tranquility.

And so, what's the best way to deal with the engine in our hearts? Get a different engine and put different fuel in it. A heart that doesn't run on envy.

When life isn't a competition, you actually find that the good life is the life that you already have. You might not have as much as others. One handful instead of two. But with it, says the teacher, you have tranquility or quietness of heart.

It's not a common word in the Bible. Actually, it's only found in one place outside of the wisdom books, and that's in Isaiah 30, verse 15. This is what the sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says.

In repentance and rest is your salvation. In quietness and trust is your strength. In David Gibson's words, this is the deep well-being of the person who knows their place in the world, content with the boundaries of their life, and able to enjoy the fruits of their labors with a cheerful heart.

[12 : 53] But who can give us that gift, that tranquility? Well, Isaiah says it's a blessing that comes from turning to the Lord to be saved and living in his strength.

Christ, he says, saves us from imploding on ourselves. When we've got our backs to Christ, we've got our backs to everyone else too. Turn to Christ, and what happens? We turn outwards towards everyone else also.

When we turn to Christ, we find that one handful is enough, because he promises always only to give us enough. And when we turn to Christ, we find that we want one hand free anyway, to help and uphold others, to share, to give.

It shouldn't shock us, should it, that coming to Christ gives us wisdom here and now, for living today, for living tomorrow, Monday morning, because Paul says in Colossians 2, verse three, in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Here is wisdom. He is wisdom from God, our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. He is wisdom, so he can save us from ourselves. He can spare us the miserable life of verse eight.

[14 : 08] Look, a man who lived and worked for me, myself, and I. He finds himself completely isolated. No son or brother to share with or to inherit with him, but he can't stop working, because he's never got enough.

And in his dissatisfaction, isolation, and weariness, he asks that golden question, who am I toiling for, he asks? Who's it all for?

And if it's only for me, he says, why am I depriving myself of enjoyment? Why am I doing it? See how utterly futile that is. To get on in life, head down, it's never enough.

There's always another promotion, another project, another pay rise. Friends, pity those people you read about in the news and you see on Instagram, because one day they're going to wake up and ask, who is it all for?

We've seen, haven't we, that you don't have to be busy to burn with envy, but I think this does have particular bite. For those of us this evening who are busy, in one way or another, if you've got a mortgage, a career, mouths to feed, people relying on you, there's incredible pressure, isn't there, to think it's just for a season, it's just until the kids have grown up, it's just until I retire, then I'll get my life back.

[15 : 35] Brothers and sisters, the teacher is warning us that we might not have much of a life left by the time we think to look up. Wisdom says, better one handful with tranquility.

Change the engine, change the fuel, keep hold with one hand, but let the other hand go. Who's it all for?

If we think it's for our family, just check they're still there with ye. If it's all for ye, your own good and gain, you're playing the fool's game, says the teacher.

Take time to ask yourself, who is it really all for? And listen to our second point, which is the teacher's answer to that question. Less me, more us.

More us. What's the solution to me, myself, and I, verse 9. Here's our third, better than, in this chapter. Two are better than one. And notice, he means better here, not only in a kind of moral or spiritual sense, that I should do things with other people, even though I could really do it better on my own.

[16 : 46] He means better in a hands-on, here and now practical way. This is a wisdom book. Wisdom books, they get us down and dirt in life.

This is the creator's guide to being a human being, being the creature that you are in his world. Donald had a great illustration of this a couple of weeks ago.

You don't open your new Ikea flat pack, do you? And get the instructions out and think, oh, what a constraint on my freedom.

You get the instructions out and think, brilliant, somebody has written down how to put this thing together. And friends, that is what the teacher's doing here under the inspiration of God.

This is not take it or leave it advice. This is the manufacturer's guide to being the sort of being that you are. Coming in the background of this whole chapter is Genesis chapter 2.

[17 : 47] Creation. Relationships. It's not good for the man to be alone. Work. He put him in the garden to work it and to keep it. But so as we have God's word open in front of us, we don't say, I've got a better way to do it, do we?

We say, thank God for giving us wisdom, for putting our lives together. So that we can live the way that he's designed us to live. Now maybe the counter arguments are already flooding in.

If you want something done properly, do it yourself. How many of us have said that? It's a one-person job. How many of us have said that? Too many cooks spoil the broth.

Okay, it's all there, isn't it? But if we're honest, often those things are true because we've worked poorly with others. And we haven't communicated, we haven't trained or helped others to come in and work alongside of us.

Or because we're actually fools who think that we're the only ones who know how to do it. And cut other people out who could actually help us if we gave them a chance. Just listen to why the teacher says two are better than one.

[18 : 56] They have a good return for their labor or toil. So this is the way to toil wisely, he says. In cooperation, not competition.

Cooperate. Turns out you might get further with a team than you do on your own. Now, that goes beyond turning a profit, I think. So the fool said in verse 8, why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?

In Hebrew, the word is tovah. But working with someone else brings, he says, a tov return. It's the same word.

Tov, tovah, enjoyment, good. So what, the man on his own lack, the team together again. Good. Enjoyment. Tov. How many times in this book already has the teacher told us to enjoy our work?

Three times. If you're not counting, you've heard that in the last three sermons. How do you enjoy your work? Here's one way, says the teacher. Get others involved.

[20 : 00] Share it. It's good for us. Lots of you have asked me if I'm enjoying having Donald here. I'm loving it. Because that's what we're made for. Working together.

I thought I would miss preaching twice on a Sunday. I get much more from sharing it. We all do. A better return. A good return. Why else is teamwork better? Well, remember, we live in a world in which we're not in control.

We're not immune. And we're not immortal. So when things go wrong, if one of them falls, verse 10. If one is called, verse 11. If one is attacked, verse 12.

What then? Two are better than one. Because when life goes wrong in ways that we can't predict, who's there to help us? It doesn't take much, does it, for a one-person job to become a two- or a three-person job.

Pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. The benefits the teacher lists here are to do with protection and security. Things that you don't need to think about in a very good world, but that you do in a world that has fallen.

[21 : 08] The teacher says, the more people you have around you, the safer you are when life goes wrong. Now, these verses are often chosen on a wedding day.

I can understand that. Marriage is an example of that partnership, isn't it? But the forefront of his mind is not the wedding. It's work.

Even verse 11, he's not thinking of a wedding night. He's thinking of cold nights on the road if you're a merchant or if you're a shepherd out on the freezing hills with your sheep.

Why not bring the flocks together for a night, he says, and share body heats? A quart of three strands. It's not obviously speaking. Is it about a husband, a wife, and the Lord? It's as if he's saying, well, two are better than one, but three are better than two.

He's looking at a braided or twisted rope and saying, this is much stronger because it's made up of three strands. Not one or two. It's a classic way in Hebrew of showing increase, counting upwards.

[22 : 14] So if two are better than one and three are better than two, well, four and you're laughing. And five. Wow. Brilliant. Brilliant. He's simply making the point that in every area of life, every area of life, there is safety, security, good in numbers.

It is good for us to be in it together. And there are countless applications to that truth. Okay, we're not going to exhaust these verses tonight, are we? I'd love for you to be speaking, asking each other about this over coffee or maybe before life group.

How does that work itself out in your life this week? How are you partnering together with others in life? But let me just draw it out a little bit for us as a church and say that it is brilliant to belong to a church.

It's a brilliant thing. We're all in different situations in life, aren't we? Some of us are at the start of life. Some of us have already been through much of life.

Some of us are not married. Some of us are. Some of us have children. Some of us don't. Some of us are studying. Some of us are working. Some of us are retired. But here we all are.

[23 : 28] The family of Christ together. United. The body of Christ. And we are so much the better for each other, aren't we? Do you believe that?

So much the better. The Christian life is family life. There's a saying, isn't there? Blood is thicker than water. But there's a sense in the church that water is thicker than blood.

Water is thicker than blood. Our union with Christ, our baptism into him, it is stronger than blood ties, isn't it? We are closer than relatives.

We are the family of the living God. We are united not by our own blood, but by his blood. And so wisdom says, lean right into that. Embrace it.

Yes, because we should. But here, because it's good for you. Less me, more us. How can the couples in the church bring those on their own into their home, into their family?

[24 : 33] How can families of three, four, five, make it six, seven, eight? How can those without children of their own gain from and add to families in the church?

So much of this does go on in the fabric, the life of our church. It's wonderful. But let me just reinforce that. Did you realize, did you know when you're doing that, we're living the life we're designed for?

That is what we're made for, human beings, God's family. And it shows. We are so much the better. What a blessing it is to belong to a church family.

Brothers and sisters, lean right into that. Don't keep at arm's length. Get to know each other. Find out what makes one another tick.

Be in and out of each other's homes. It's wonderful. How's your life group? Perhaps you don't feel you get much out of it, but do you know how much others in your group might get from you?

[25 : 35] Okay, a Wednesday night, it might not be possible, but a message, a coffee, a chat, it might make all the difference to somebody in your group and to you. Some of us find groups hard.

Understand that. We don't like crowds. Sundays can be difficult. But even if we are quieter, even if we're introverts, wisdom says, don't let that be your identity.

Don't let it be a reason for you to withdraw. Even when you don't feel like it, come. Reach out. Reply to that message. Connect. Connect. You will be the better for it.

Your life will be richer. You'll even be safer, even if you don't feel it at the time. Who's it all for? The teacher says, less about me, less about me, more about us.

Think us. Two are better than one. A three-fold cord is not easily broken. Chat about it afterwards. See how life could change.

[26 : 41] Speak with somebody. Speak with me. Speak in your life group. But lastly, the teacher says, we do only have a limited time to decide.

Lastly, he says, it's me or it's us, but only for now. Only for now. He ends with a story, and I'll ask better than, in verse 13, better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning.

Now, the Hebrew in these last verses is quite difficult. That's why we get wide-ranging translations. If you've got a different version of the Bible, you might read something quite different here. It's also not completely clear.

It's not completely clear whether the youth and the king are real or imaginary, and if they're real, who they are. So we're actually going to come back to the king in this book because he pops up more than once.

Have a look later on, if you like. We're going to come back and think about the king. But what the teacher's saying here is that even the benefits of we over me are still only a breath.

[27 : 52] What's the story? The poor but wise youth takes lots of people with him. All who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth. I think we're meant to understand by contrast that the old but foolish king is living the verse 8 life.

The man all alone. One way or another, the youth ends up becoming the king. He's the king's successor. So two very different kinds of king, right?

A wise king who brings others with him. A foolish king who goes it on his own. But both beat the same end. They both die.

And look, those who came later were not pleased with the successor. What's he saying? Living for we and not me might get you from the prison to the throne in this life under the sun.

But it doesn't promise you a lasting legacy. Think of Winston Churchill as prime minister during the war. He was loved. The nation was behind him.

[28 : 57] Whole countries, whole continents looked to him for leadership. All who lived and walked under the sun followed him. But those who've come later are much less impressed, aren't they?

His statue gets vandalized. His faults now overshadow his virtues in the public eye. Understand, says the teacher, chasing the gain of others and relying on others for your good will serve you while you're here, while you're alive.

But do not think it will seal your place in history. George Washington shares this wisdom in the musical Hamilton. Let me tell you what I wish I'd known.

When I was young and dreamed of glory, you have no control who lives, who dies, who tells your story. Those lines could have been written by the teacher himself.

Less me, more us. It won't make you great. You won't be remembered for it. It's still a breath. If you want to be remembered, he says, forget about it. You won't be. But that doesn't make it meaningless, does it?

[30 : 06] If you want to make the most of your few days here and now, if you want to thrive, your life to be full, if you want to succeed and have a good return, if you want to be safe and cared for, if you want to get the best out of your work and still have rest and tranquility and quietness in your heart, in short, if you want to make the best out of your life.

If you want to make the best out of your life, if you want to be safe and safe and safe, if you want to be safe and safe, if you want to make it less me and more we. Paul summed it up for us earlier in Galatians 5.

That is God's will for your life, his blueprint for you.

And here is the wisdom, the manual that goes with it. Who is it all for? It is not for you. It's for your neighbor. It's for us, not me.

Don't go it alone. Bring others along with you. Two are better than one. A cord of three strands is not easily broken. Learn to live with one hand full and the other hand free for others.

[31 : 33] And Christ, our wisdom says, you will live and die with peace in your heart. A tranquility that surpasses all human understanding.

Rest here and now and forever. Friends, what might you need to let go of? And who might you need to take hold of?

Who is it all for? Let's bring ourselves to Christ, our wisdom together and pray.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Our Father, we confess before you our ignorance, the darkness of our hearts, our opposition to others, our envy of them, our dissatisfaction and discontentment with your good gifts.

Lord, we confess that we have so often set our eyes on a worldly horizon and strive towards it, rather than to set our eyes on Christ, who is seated in heavenly places above.

[32 : 54] And so we come to you, not because we are wise, but because we are fools, and we ask you for wisdom. Lord, draw us near to Christ, our wisdom, we pray.

Teach us, Lord, we pray, to live with one hand full and one hand free. Lord, teach us, we pray, the wisdom of relying on others.

Lord, help us, we pray, by your power to overcome our inhibitions, our shame, whatever it is, Lord, that we keep us from others, knowing us, knowing others.

Lord, draw us together, we pray, even as you draw us closer to you. Teach us wisdom, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.