

# OpenTheo

## May 18th: Ecclesiastes 4 & 1 John 5

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Human society in the vapour. Keep yourself from idols.

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## Transcript

Ecclesiastes chapter 4. Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them. On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them.

And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor.

This also is vanity and a striving after wind. The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after wind.

Again I saw vanity under the sun. One man who has no other, either son or brother, yet

there is no end to all his toil, and his eyes are never satisfied with riches, so that he never asks, For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure? This also is vanity and an unhappy business. Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil.

For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, and has not another to lift him up. Again if two lie together, they keep warm.

But how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice.

For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led.

Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind. Ecclesiastes chapter 4 continues the preacher's exploration of the vaporous character of life, the ways in which it can be transitory and futile.

In this chapter the focus is more upon the relationships between human beings and their interactions. He speaks of oppression and envy, of sluggishness, of overwork and of isolation, of the benefits of mutual support and the vaporous character of status and position. In the previous chapter he had spoken about injustice in society.

In verses 16 and 17, Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness even there was wickedness. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. Considering the reality of oppression, he sees the tears of the oppressed and the power of the oppressors, and indeed there seems to be no relief in sight.

God doesn't seem to be doing anything. No human judge is acting on their behalf, and in such misery and desperation, what hope is there? The preacher is not sure that it is worth living in those sorts of situations. Indeed, the dead who are delivered from such oppression could be considered fortunate, and indeed more fortunate still would be those who have never been born into such oppression in the first place.

They have never seen the cruelty of life under the sun. One might perhaps think here of Job's lament and curse upon the day of his birth in Job chapter 3. To make matters worse, commitment to one's toil seems to exacerbate the situation. As if one succeeds in one's work and gains great riches, one only ends up becoming the object of envy for other people, encouraging their predation.

This could be read in two different ways. Either it is the envy of the person who works

that drives him, or the result of the person who works is envy in other people, most probably the latter. The character of the sluggard is a familiar one from the Book of Proverbs.

Proverbs chapter 6 verses 9 to 11. How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man. Chapter 19 verse 24.

The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, and will not even bring it back to his mouth. And chapter 20 verse 24. The sluggard does not plough in the autumn, he will seek at harvest and have nothing.

The inactivity of the sluggard's hands means that he has no food, and he ends up consuming himself. He squanders and devours his own resources, wastes his patrimony, and ends up losing his capital. But there is a problem on the other side.

If the sluggard's hands are both inactive, there is also the overworked person, who has both of his hands full of toil and enjoys no rest. Having one hand full of toil is a very good thing, but you need a handful of quietness to go with it. Work needs to be accompanied by rest.

A particularly powerful example of this futility is seen in the person who is isolated, the person who is without friends or companions. This person toils non-stop, but he is not toiling for anyone else. He has no one to give anything to, and since he is not enjoying rest in his own labour, what is it all for? Relief and reward in toil is found in companionship.

While the preacher's point here would include marriage, it is a far broader point than just marriage. The good companion is a way to avoid the vaporousness of the situation of verses 7-8. It is also a way by which oppression and loss can be relieved, because the companion can be a deliverer.

The companion also relieves discomfort and hardship. The preacher expresses this by speaking of two people lying together to keep each other warm, perhaps on a journey, in the watchers of the night, or in the marriage bed. Likewise, the companion is someone who can watch your back, who can stand by your side and support you, who can fight with you, and as he stands with you, together you can withstand whatever opponents come your way.

If two people together is good, three people together is even better. Knowing and valuing companions is a common theme within wisdom literature. We can think about Proverbs 17 verse 17, a friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.

Or chapter 18 verse 24, a man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a

friend who sticks closer than a brother. Much of the book of Job is concerned with Job's struggles when his companions have turned against him, and his desire for an advocate or intermediary to stand up for him. The vaporous character of succession has already been an issue within the book of Ecclesiastes, in chapter 2 verses 18 to 21.

I hated all my toil, in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled, and use my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.

So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity, and a great evil. Whereas earlier he had spoken about generational succession, here he speaks about succession on the throne.

He presents us with a roughly drawn picture, which seemed to refer to three different characters. First of all there is an old and foolish king. This foolish king does not listen to counsel.

And then on the other hand there is a poor and wise youth. This youth rises from nothing at all, from the prison all the way to the throne. This might give us a sense of the transitory character of the glory and power of man, even of those who enjoy the status and the office of kings.

It also suggests that wisdom wins out over folly. However there is a twist in the tale. A third character comes along.

There is another young upstart who is going to stand in the place of the one who rose to the position of the king, although he gained his position through wisdom, he is going to lose it and be forgotten. This story does not seem to refer to any specific situation that we know of in scripture, although it is clearly reminiscent of a couple of major stories in scripture. The story of Joseph who rose from the prison to the second in the realm, and then after all of his work for Egypt was later forgotten by a pharaoh that rose up.

It might also remind us of the story of Saul and David. Saul is the old and foolish king who won't take advice, who rejects the Lord, and then David rises up to take his place. He is the wise and faithful youth of humble background.

Nevertheless when Absalom his son rises up against him, all the people flock to Absalom. Despite all of the wisdom of that young man who rose to be king, the people prove to be fickle and will reject him. This too is vaporous and striving after the wind.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which pursuing companionship might relieve certain of the problems that the preacher has discussed to this point? 1 John chapter 5 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and

everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome.

For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world, and this is the victory that has overcome the world, our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by the water only, but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.

For there are three that testify, the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he is born concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself.

Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has born concerning his Son. And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life.

Whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the request that we have asked of him. If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life, to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death, I do not say that one should pray for that.

All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death. We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who is born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true, and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

In 1 John chapter 5, the concluding chapter of the epistle, we see further developments of the central themes of the book, love for God and each other, being born of God, obedience to the commands of God, and belief in Jesus as the Christ. This leads to a somewhat surprising conclusion. A further sign of having been born of God is belief in Jesus as the Messiah.

We might here recall John chapter 1 verses 12-13, but to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. Once again, John connects our love for the Father with our love for our brothers and sisters. Those who love the Father love those born of him.

John has already explored the logical connection between these two forms of love at the end of the preceding chapter. This logic, however, can move in both directions, as we see in verse 2. There is a circularity to this, but it is not a logical one. Love for our brothers and sisters will entail love for the Father, and love for the Father will entail love for our brothers and sisters.

We can easily presume that our love for others is self-evident, but here John teaches us that we need to test this love to see whether it is genuine, by examining whether we love God and obey his commandments. A supposed love for the children of God that does not proceed from love for God and keeping of his commandments is not real love at all. Here John punctures some of the common misunderstandings that one often sees in arguments about the centrality of love.

Such arguments take a supposedly self-evident human love as the measure of all things, and supposedly the only thing that really matters when it comes to Christian religion. But this is not at all what John teaches. Rather, John stresses the importance of the alignment of a number of key factors by which we can discern the genuine character of our identity as children of God.

Richard Yarborough, in his commentary, observes the simultaneity of three components of reborn Christian experience, the pistis, faith, the ethical, obedience to commandments, and the relational, or agapic, love for God and others. The law was always summed up in love in a way that provided an alignment between obedience to the commandments and love that tested both. True obedience to the commandments could only be rendered in love, and love was necessarily obedient to the commandments.

The two couldn't be divorced, which meant both that love could never become an antinomian reality, bound only to feelings and affections and existing altogether apart from the law, but nor could obedience to the law be reduced to slavish and legalistic observance. It was always to be fulfilled in love. We see this in key passages such as Deuteronomy 6, verses 1-5.

In Deuteronomy 11, verse 1. This is a point that Jesus also argued in his teaching. In John chapter 14, verse 15. And in verse 21 of that chapter.

Against the notions held by many, the commandments of God are not burdensome. This doesn't mean that we don't recoil at them in our sinfulness, or resist them in fear of

coming into the light. However, when we actually obey the commandments of God, we discover that far from weighing us down with a heavy load, the yoke of Christ is easy, and his burden is light.

His commandments set us free. Those who have been born of God overcome the world, the complex system of lusts, seductive pleasures and vainglorious pride that holds so many of us in its thrall. This victory, a victory manifested in our keeping of God's commandments, is achieved through our faith.

The person who overcomes the world is the person who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. In verse 1 it was belief in Jesus as the Christ that evidenced that someone was born of God. Here it is the belief that Jesus is the Son of God that evidences this.

The two terms, Christ and Son of God, are largely synonymous, although the second accents the relationship between the Son and the Father. There are, however, people who deny this identification of Jesus as the Son of God. Some might see the man Jesus as if he were only possessed by the person of the eternal word for a period of time, who departed from him before his sufferings.

This was the position of early church heretics such as Corinthus. Against such teachers, John insists that Jesus Christ was the incarnate Son. He came by water and blood, not by the water only, but by the water and the blood.

This seems like a very strange and obscure statement to us, but it opposes those who believe that the word descended upon the man Jesus at the point of his baptism and then left him before his sufferings of the cross. John will not compromise with such a position. Jesus' earthly ministry did not just involve baptism, it also involved the cross.

The water is Christ's baptism in the Jordan, and the blood is the baptism of his death and the cross at Calvary. Contrary to those who argue that the baptism of Jesus was the time that he received the descending Christ, John claims that the spirit who descended at Christ's baptism in the form of a dove, testifying to him as the Son of God, is the one who testifies more generally, as Jesus taught in John 15, verse 26, Some translations have a different reading of verse 7, the King James version for instance, for there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one. This might be a handy proof text for Trinitarian doctrine if this were a genuine reading.

However, the evidence weighs very strongly against it, suggesting that it was something that was likely accidentally incorporated into the text at a later point from a marginal note. It is found in none of the early Greek manuscripts, and is absent in the arguments of the early church theologians who would have leapt at such a strong proof text for the doctrine of the Trinity. What John does speak of is a threefold witness of the spirit, the water and the blood, united in their testimony.

The spirit bears witness to the truth of Christ, in his work in the body of Christ, in his work within the hearts and lives of individual Christians, in his inspiration of the testimony of Scripture. The spirit points to Christ and testifies concerning him. The water of Jesus' baptism continues to bear witness to the truth of Christ, as we see in the baptism of Christ, a Trinitarian testimony to Jesus Christ's identity as the beloved Son.

The blood of Jesus' crucifixion bears testimony to his identity, to the pouring out of his life until death. And these three bear an enduring witness, the spirit that descended upon Jesus in his baptism, descended upon the church in Pentecost, and has borne witness to Christ throughout the history of the church. The water of Jesus' baptism is applied to us in our baptisms, baptising us into him, testifying to his identity in the historical event, in the church's performance of baptism upon new converts, and in the confession by which we receive the waters of baptism.

The blood of Jesus' cross likewise bears an enduring testimony. By the blood that testified to the pouring out of his life, Jesus entered into the heavenly places, and by that blood, applied to us, has opened a new and living way for us as his people, assuring us of access to God. Whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper, this testimony of the blood of Christ is borne to us once again.

We may receive the testimony of trustworthy human beings, but the testimony of God is so much greater, and God has borne testimony to his Son by his Spirit, and in the testimony of the water and the blood. What's more, this testimony is not just an external testimony, like regular human testimony. It is a testimony that the Spirit bears within all of those who believe in Jesus as the Son of God.

Not receiving this testimony is to make God a liar, but receiving it is to receive eternal life in the Son to whom the testimony bears witness. The choice of paths with which we are left is a stark one. Either we have the Son, through belief in the testimony of God by his Spirit, and have life in him, or we reject the testimony of God and do not have life.

John has written this epistle to people who do believe in the name of the Son of God, to the end that they might enjoy eternal life. Here we might remember John's explanation for his reasons for writing the Gospel in John 20, verses 30-31. Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Here John seems to have a further concern. He doesn't just want his hearers to have eternal life, but he wants them to know that they have eternal life, a knowledge that might be threatened by erroneous claims about Jesus that might unsettle them in their faith. This knowledge is so important as it produces the confidence that fuels our prayer life.



Where this firm knowledge in the identity of Christ is, the sure confidence of faith that corresponds to it can be there too, which leads, in natural progression, to an assured prayer life. John's concern here is not primarily answers to prayer, but rather the communion of prayer, the fact that we know that when we bring our concerns and needs to God, he listens to us and he cares about us as his beloved children, and that he will, as a loving father, give us whatever we need as we bring our concerns to him. John moves to the question here of how to deal with sin among our brothers.

He describes two different types of sin, a sin not leading to death and a sin that does lead to death. There are some people who sin, but then bring themselves into the light to expose their sin and to seek forgiveness. They do not cover it up or disguise it.

They are honest about what they have done and they seek to be restored. There are others who sin in a way that is a fundamental rejection of the path of Christ. They reject the light.

They live from a fundamental rebellion against God and hatred of their brothers. And in such cases no hope is held out. Unless there is a fundamental change of direction, they will forfeit eternal life entirely.

Sin of any kind is still sin. It remains deadly, even if it won't always prove fatal for the one who sins. The one who has been born of God does not sin.

It is antithetical to the sort of people that the children of God are. God protects those born of him so that they are not overpowered by Satan. Sin is alien to who we are in Christ, to what we will be finally revealed to be when our identity as the children of God is fully revealed.

So we must firmly reject it and repent of it now. If we do not, we have chosen a path that will lead to our death and final destruction. We will forfeit eternal life.

If we willfully and persistently cling on to sin, if we walk in the darkness, if we hate our brothers and rebel against God, we reveal ourselves not to be of God and there is no hope for us. But yet, if we sin and we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin, to restore us, to bring us into the light and into fellowship and communion with him. Humanity is divided into two groups, those who belong to the world, the realm of sinful rebellion under the sway of the evil one, and those who belong to God as his children.

Our state as those who belong to God is not something that we enjoy by natural birth or by nature. It results from the illumination brought by Jesus Christ as the Son of God. It brings us into a knowledge of the truth.

Indeed, we are brought into the one who is true, into the Father, as we are brought into his Son, Jesus Christ. To be in the Son is to be in the Father, as the Father and the Son

are one. John concludes in a way that will not leave his hearers in the slightest shadow of a doubt.

Jesus Christ is not just the one who brings knowledge of the true God and of the way to eternal life. He himself is the true God and eternal life. The identification of Jesus with eternal life was present at the beginning of the epistle in chapter 1 verses 1 to 3. However, here at the end, John goes even further.

As in his statement about the Word being God at the beginning of his gospel, he ends his first epistle by identifying Jesus Christ as no one less than the true God himself, come to us in human flesh. John's first epistle ends on a very surprising note. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

His point, however, clearly follows from all that has preceded it. True life, confidence with God in prayer, deliverance from sin, and love for God and others is found in the true knowledge of God. And this knowledge is found in believing Jesus to be the Christ and the Son of God, receiving the testimony born by God concerning his Son in the spirit, in the word, and in the word of God.

Anything less than the genuine article, anything less than Jesus Christ in his true and full identity cannot offer or provide these things. Consequently, at all costs and above all else, we must keep ourselves from idols, from any counterfeit that, falsely purporting to be the real Christ, would adulterate the testimony that God has borne, leaving us with something other than the eternal word of life himself. It is a question to consider.

How might John's emphasis upon idolatry at the close of his letter help us better to understand the importance of the knowledge of God in Christ more generally in our lives as Christians?