

## Empty Ambitions

### Ecclesiastes 4:4-12

Years ago there was a television programme called 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous'. The programme would show you the houses, cars, boats, entertainments, outings and parties of the very wealthy, and very famous. One thing that people took for granted is that other people wanted to look into the lives of the rich and famous. And the reason for that is that the desire to be rich and popular is a fairly common desire.

No one would watch a TV show called "Lifestyles of the Poor and Obscure" or "Lifestyles of the Plain and Mundane". No, people are interested in the lives of the rich and famous, because they themselves want to be rich and famous. If we had some kind of device, like a Geiger counter, which would start clicking loudly when it got near a heart with ambitions to be rich and famous, what would it sound like near your heart?

In this passage, Solomon is dealing with ambition. Since the whole book is about understanding what life is really about, he is once again going to tell you what a waste of your life is. Up to now Solomon has shown us the emptiness of so much of life, lived without being in relationship with God - the emptiness of pleasure, of worldly philosophy, of seeking full control, of seeking full comprehension, of the lack of justice and integrity in places of power.

But he has also been showing us the view from heaven. God is the giver of gifts. God is the giver of knowledge. God is in full control of life. God has all knowledge regarding life. God is the final judge, and He puts men into power. God does all this, puts a sense of the eternal and transcendent in the heart of man, and then allows death as the exclamation point. Man must come to God humbly, accepting God as the giver of joy, understanding, satisfaction, justice.

In this passage, Solomon is going to give us two ambitions that are a waste of your life to pursue. If we want to know how to waste our lives, and end up saying, vanity of vanities- Solomon gives us two of these ambitions.

#### I. The Ambition for Prosperity is Empty(4:4-12)

**Ecclesiastes 4:4-8** *Again, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind. <sup>5</sup> ¶ The fool folds his hands And consumes his own flesh. <sup>6</sup> ¶ Better a handful with quietness Than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind. <sup>7</sup> ¶ Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun: <sup>8</sup> There is one alone, without companion: He has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labors, Nor is his eye satisfied with riches. But he never asks, "For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?" This also is vanity and a grave misfortune.*

Solomon looks upon life and he sighs as he sees another great waste of man's precious life. If a man's short life on this earth could be compared to a 2 litre bottle, he sees people pouring out their lives into the dry desert sand of this first ambition: to get ahead financially. People have the desire to be rich, to be admired, and to get a bigger bank balance. Today we call it the rat race. That term conjures up images of lab rats running in a wheel, expending energy but getting nowhere, or of rats placed in a maze, making noise, bumping into each other, but finding no solution. So man scurries about working, working, working to get more money, more status, and more privilege.

Solomon sees this as a huge waste of life. In particular, he sees two things which make this rat-race a tremendous waste of our precious lives. The motive is empty and the purpose is pointless.

#### ***The Emptiness of The Motive: Jealousy***

*4: 4 Again, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor. This also*

*is vanity and grasping for the wind.*

Another way of saying that is:

Then I saw that all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbour.

All the skill and all the industry and all the labour you see around you is a result of man's envy of his neighbour. The great economies of the world run on the fuel of jealousy.

In what way?

People compete with one another. They desire to not be outdone by their neighbours. They do not want to be the poorest, or to have the oldest car, the shabbiest clothes, or live in the poorest neighbourhoods. So what do they do? They work hard. They come up with inventions, and schemes and business plans, and marketing techniques and productivity plans. The drive to not fall behind, but to look like you are ahead is what drives so many people to work.

Think about how much advertising is based on pure envy, you must look like this model, experience what he is experiencing, and be the talk of the town. be admired in this car, be envied in these clothes, these shoes, be one step ahead with this cell-phone.

It's like seeing a scene in nature where the tortoises on the beach keep moving forward, not to get anywhere, but to be ahead of the others. And if one moves ahead, the others have to outdo him. They're all moving, not because they want to go anywhere, but because they have to be first. So man works and builds and improves and develops not to glorify God, not to uplift human life, but mostly, to outdo his neighbour.

And before we take the speck out of our neighbour's eye, make sure there isn't a beam in our own. When last did you put in that extra effort at work purely to be able to afford that jacket, so as to be admired? When last did you do more because you couldn't stand the thought of the other person getting the recognition? Or haven't you ever pursued a job because of the life it would give you and the status it would provide? Or haven't you pushed to get those good marks mainly to be first in the class and to triumph over the others? How much of your work is aimed at beating others into second place; at maneuvering yourself into a position where you will be admired, praised, liked or envied.

Solomon says to be ambitious; to be admired through your financial success is vanity. Why? It is pointless because you are labouring merely to look like or better than your neighbours, who are in turn in competition with you. You seek to impress people whose opinion you claim doesn't matter to you. You spend money you don't have to buy things you don't need to impress people you don't like.

It achieves nothing except to keep the fires of jealousy, covetousness and envy burning. The motive is empty: jealousy. But not only is the motive empty, but the end-result is mindless.

***The End-Result is Mindless: Hoarding it for no one.***

*Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun: <sup>8</sup> There is one alone, without companion: He has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labors, nor is his eye satisfied with riches. But he never asks, "For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?" This also is vanity and a grave misfortune.*  
4:7-8

Solomon sees something else. He sees a person alone. This person is not connected to anyone else. There is no child, and there is no brother. By brother, I would include the close bonds of deep friendship. This man has isolated himself from all others, from family, from friends. There is no companion – no spouse, no trusted associate or confidant. To be this alone is a choice the person has made. He has alienated others, he has isolated himself. However, in spite of all this, he works as if

he is feeding a family of 15. There is no end to his labours. He works till 10pm 5 nights a week. He is in on weekends. He takes his work home with him.

**Psalm 127:2** *It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, and to eat the bread of sorrows; for so He gives His beloved sleep.*

With that kind of work-ethic, he is sure to earn some considerable money. However, he is never satisfied with his riches. He gets paid far more than he needs as a single individual. In fact, most of the time, he doesn't even get to spend all the money he is earning. He just keeps storing it up and storing it up and growing his bank balance.

And here's the madness: He never stops to ask, for whom am I doing all this? He is making sacrifices – time and energy sacrifices. But for what? You make sacrifices for some other reason – to meet the needs of others, or to enable something else. This man just keeps on sacrificing for no reason. He just keeps hoarding up the goods.

Hetty Green was a miser. She died in 1915, leaving an estate valued at over one million dollars, but always ate cold oatmeal because she believed it cost too much to heat it. Her son had to suffer through a leg amputation unnecessarily because Hetty wasted too much time looking for a free medical clinic.

That's a kind of madness.

One of Aesop's fables:

To make sure that his property would always remain safe and protected, a miser sold all that he had and converted it into one great lump of gold, which he hid in a hole in the ground. Since he went there continually to visit and inspect it, one of his workers became curious and suspected that his master had hidden a treasure. When the miser's back was turned, the worker went to the spot and stole the gold. Soon thereafter the miser returned, and when he found the hole empty, he wept and tore his hair. But a neighbour, who witnessed his grief, told him, "Don't fret any longer. Just take a stone and put it in the same place. Then imagine that it's your lump of gold. Since you never meant to use it, the stone will be just as good as the gold."

You don't need to be a millionaire to be a hoarder. You hoard any time you save up more than you could spend, or could be sensible for paying your debts and expenses. You hoard when you no longer have the goal of meeting particular needs in your family, church, mission field. You are hoarding once you start chasing numbers and figures, like a dog chasing its tail.

**Luke 12:15-21** *And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." <sup>16</sup> Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. <sup>17</sup> "And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' <sup>18</sup> "So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. <sup>19</sup> 'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry." ' <sup>20</sup> "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' <sup>21</sup> "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."*

To have more people than you have money to bless with, is a good problem. To have more money than people you love, according to the Word of God, is a bad problem. Rather the relationships than the riches.

Those riches are means to an end. When they become an end in themselves, it is a madness.

Solomon says – this is vanity. This is a grave misfortune. This is a terrible misspending of your life. To work and work and work for no other reason than to impress people you don't know, and to gain material goods that you do not have enough people in your life to share with.

Now some people might wrongly conclude – well, then, let's just drop out altogether. And that's what some do.

<sup>5</sup> ¶ *The fool folds his hands And consumes his own flesh.*

Sandwiched in-between the competitor and the mindless workaholic is the sluggard. This man just cops out altogether. He doesn't want to be part of the rat race. But in fact, he doesn't want even a handful of quietness. And as he folds his hands in complacency, his lifestyle of no work and no pay eventually starts to eat up his savings, then his assets, then the very shirt off his back, until his body is consuming the very fat and muscle of his body, because he is starving.

**Proverbs 21:25** *The desire of the lazy man kills him, For his hands refuse to labor.*

Now this ought to be a goad to us. If we are placing our hope in a kind of happy ambition to succeed and do well, Solomon is puncturing our tyres. He says, you will struggle to beat your neighbour, and for what? Once you are there, you have hurt so many people, you have hardly anyone to share your success with, and the people who know about are the people who envy you and hate you. What's the point? There is no point, if you have ambition under the sun. There is no point if you are godless and Christless. If you have not been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, you need to know that you are chasing shadows and mirages when you chase wealth.

Well, for some the ambition is not so much for riches, as it is for recognition. They are not so much after the luxury of riches, as they are the lust for recognition. They don't want fortune as much as they want fame. They don't want prosperity, as much as they want popularity. That leads Solomon to tell a mini-parable to illustrate the second kind of vain ambition

## II. The Ambition for Popularity is Empty

**Ecclesiastes 4:13-16** *Better a poor and wise youth Than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more. <sup>14</sup> For he comes out of prison to be king, Although he was born poor in his kingdom. <sup>15</sup> I saw all the living who walk under the sun; They were with the second youth who stands in his place. <sup>16</sup> There was no end of all the people over whom he was made king; Yet those who come afterward will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and grasping for the wind.*

Here is the story:

First, there is a **Foolish King**. There is a foolish king sitting on the throne. He will no longer receive advice from others. He sounds like Ahab who refused to hear the prophet Micaiah. Or king Asa who did not want to hear the prophet Hanani. This is a man who has had his own way for too long, and will not listen to calls for change. We have enough examples of such rulers in Africa in our era.

But then there is a **Feisty Youth**. Sitting in jail, for reasons we don't know, is an intelligent, sharp, and probably charming youth. Perhaps he is in jail for his opposition to the king. But he is wise. When he speaks, people are inspired. The fact that he is poor only adds to his charm. He has nothing, but his character is so winsome, so inspiring, that the poverty becomes like an ultra-violet light, bringing out the power of his character. An unpopular king, and a popular prisoner.

At some point, the king is deposed; the youth comes out of prison, and straight onto the throne, like Joseph did. His is an explosive rise, from shame, nothingness and suffering, to the highest place in the land. His is the rags to riches story. Although he was born poor, his ambition to rise to the top is met.

Solomon is painting the ultimate rise. Born poor, no hope, languishing in jail, he uses all his wits and youthful vigour to replace the stubborn and unpopular king. That's the dream of free societies. Anyone can do anything. You can start at the bottom, and if you work hard enough and want it badly enough – you can get to the top.

Well, Solomon exposes the vanity of this desire.

He shows the third element – a **Fickle People**.

The young man comes and rules over a massive group of people – no end to them. However, as time passes, the people are no longer in love with him. The novelty wears off. People are born who no longer regard him as the hero; he is just the king. They no longer adore him. Perhaps he adds to the problem, and with the power he has, becomes just like the foolish king who went before him. And now after all that, he sits at the top, and the people no longer rejoice in him. He is probably despised, disliked, sneered at. He was the hero, the saviour, the revolutionary, now he is just old hat.

When young, poor, wise and in jail, he was ironically better off than when he was rich, old, and on the throne. His humble circumstances were better than his latter exalted end. He could have been content with that, and now having climbed the ladder, he has less contentment than when he was 'worse off'.

Does that happen today? How many people have given their lives to a political cause, and once they rise to the top, the very people who voted them in now vilify and criticise them in the harshest terms. They sought fame, popularity, and once they get into power, they are extremely unpopular.

There was a scholar who after hard work became the noted expert in his field—who committed suicide. At the funeral one of his colleagues commented to another, "I just don't understand it. We all admired him. He was at the top of his discipline." The other colleague replied, "Don't you realize? There's nothing at the top!"

So many people push to get to the top, where they hope they will find satisfaction. They want to become the manager of the firm, the most accomplished musician, the star sportsman, the leader or the teacher of the ministry, the head of the organisation, and the spokesperson for the group. Once there, they find far more problems than when they were not in that place. They find far more unpopularity than popularity. They receive far more criticism than praise.

At one point, the mother of James and John came to Jesus and asked Him, please let my sons sit next to you on your left and right in your kingdom. Jesus said, "You don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I will drink, or be baptised with the baptism I will be baptised with?" In other words, you want the position, do you have any idea of the suffering it will require.

Scripture warns us in other places about making making this kind of climb our ambition:

**Jeremiah 45:5** *"And do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for behold, I will bring adversity on all flesh," says the LORD.*

**Romans 12:16** *Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.*

The ambition to be popular is strong in us. We want to be liked. We want to be known for our knowledge, or for our good works, or for our financial success, or for our Christian commitment, or for our sweet and kind attitudes, or for our business-savvy ideas, or for our academic degrees, or for our fashionable clothes, looks or lifestyles. But being popular in a world of sinners is an empty ambition.

**Luke 6:26** *Woe to you when all men speak well of you, For so did their fathers to the false prophets.*

The ambition to be prosperous is futile. It comes from jealousy. It ends up helping no one. It usually flies away. The ambition to be popular is futile. Once you get to the top, it is lonely. The same people who wanted you in, now want you out.

What then is the answer? Once again, Solomon sends us back to the life lived under God, for God and to God.

The nails in this passage come in the form of the word 'better', found in verses 6, 9 and 13. Better is a handful of quietness, better are two than one, better is a poor and wise youth. When we consider the contrasts of empty ambition for prosperity and popularity, this is what the Scripture is commending. Instead of grasping for prosperity, aim for **contentment**. Instead of grasping for popularity, aim for **godly companionship**.

### **Aim for God-Given Contentment and Companions**

Where do we see God commending contentment?

**Ecclesiastes 4:6** *Better a handful with quietness Than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind.*

What does that mean? What is the handful of quietness? A handful is just enough, isn't it? When we think about the opposite, both hands full, we think of someone who is cluttered up, the one carrying so many bags, they can hardly walk. If someone has both hands full, they cannot carry any more, they are barely managing to hold onto what is in both hands. On the other hand, someone with a handful has a good grip on what he has. He is not in danger of dropping it. He can take on more.

Solomon says a handful of quietness is what you want. This refers to the simple life of contentment. It is not the noisy, striving, grasping life of the discontented man, who always wants more.

**Proverbs 30:15-16** *The leech has two daughters -- Give and Give! There are three things that are never satisfied, Four never say, "Enough!": <sup>16</sup> The grave, The barren womb, The earth that is not satisfied with water -- And the fire never says, "Enough!"*

The life driven by worldly ambition is never content. The goalpost always moves, and so the striving never ends. But the life of contentment is the life which accepts little or much from God's hand, and accepts it gratefully.

**Proverbs 15:16** *Better is a little with the fear of the LORD, Than great treasure with trouble. <sup>17</sup> Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, Than a fatted calf with hatred.*

**Proverbs 16:8** *Better is a little with righteousness, Than vast revenues without justice.*

**Proverbs 17:1** *Better is a dry morsel with quietness, Than a house full of feasting with strife.*

Philip Parham tells the story of a rich industrialist who was disturbed to find a fisherman sitting lazily beside his boat. "Why aren't you out there fishing?" he asked.

"Because I've caught enough fish for today," said the fisherman.

"Why don't you catch more fish than you need?" the rich man asked.

"What would I do with them?"

"You could earn more money," came the impatient reply, "and buy a better boat so you could go deeper and catch more fish. You could purchase nylon nets, catch even more fish, and make more money. Soon you'd have a fleet of boats and be rich like me."

The fisherman asked, "Then what would I do?"

"You could sit down and enjoy life," said the industrialist.

"What do you think I'm doing now?" the fisherman replied as he looked placidly out to sea.

Paul spoke about the kind of people who follow the ambition to be prosperous compared with those who seek godly contentment.

**1 Timothy 6:6-11** *Now godliness with contentment is great gain. <sup>7</sup> For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. <sup>8</sup> And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. <sup>9</sup> But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. <sup>10</sup> For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.*

<sup>11</sup> ¶ But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness.

**Contentment is not the result of getting everything you want. Contentment is a result of adjusting your wants to God's supply.**

**Philippians 4:11-12** *Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: <sup>12</sup> I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.*

The secret of contentment is when we learn that God Himself is the source of our ultimate satisfaction. We must begin by repenting of living life for ourselves, and coming to God for forgiveness. We must turn our lives over to Him through His Son Jesus Christ, ask Him to forgive us and make us new. If we do not receive new hearts *from* God, we can never be content *in* God. We trust His ordering of our lives. We trust His sovereign will for us. We trust His good and kind heart. We trust His promises for the future.

**Hebrews 13:5** *Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."*

The man living the simple life is able to take on more responsibility if he needs to. He is not in danger of dropping what he already has. He does not feel like at any moment he might drop everything. That kind of life comes about from slowly but surely accepting the world's ambitions as good.

If you want an ambition, the Bible tells you to make this your ambition:

**1 Thessalonians 4:11** *that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you,*

Instead of grasping for prosperity, aim for contentment and instead of grasping for popularity, aim for **godly companionship**.

**Ecclesiastes 4:9-12** *Two are better than one, Because they have a good reward for their labor. <sup>10</sup> For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, For he has no one to help him up. <sup>11</sup> Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; But how can one be warm alone? <sup>12</sup> Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.*

There is a world of difference between popularity and companionship. Popularity is when groups of people admire you from a distance. Companionship is when someone is close to you and still loves you. Popularity is people loving what they think you are or have. Companionship is someone accepting you for what they know you to be. Popularity comes and goes like the seasons, but a friend sticks closer than a brother.

Solomon tells us that two are better than one. He gives us four reasons:

Companionship can produce more- they have a good reward for their labour.

Companionship provides strength during weakness.

Companionship provides comfort during need.

Companionship provides defence during attack.

Now while marriage is one of the closest forms of companionship, it is not the only kind. When God said, it is not good for man to be alone, He did not mean that singleness is a curse, otherwise Paul's writings in I Corinthians 7 would contradict Genesis 2. God meant that man should not be without companionship. That includes other kinds of family, and our close and precious friends. Within the body of Christ, God gives us companions, so that loneliness in the church is a scandal. No one should be lonely within the body of Christ, for we are members one of another. I'm not saying you might never feel lonely, in desiring a closer friend or to be married. But no Christian

should be solitary. No Christian should be going it alone. When God saved you, God gave you companions. Seeking popularity and fame and notoriety from strangers who will end up hating you is foolish, God has given you His people. So humble yourself, and embrace God's people as your companions.

**Romans 12:16** *Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.*

And once again, it comes back to God - for if you love God, you must love His people.

**1 John 4:12** *No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.*

The Christian who is truly loving God, is loving God's people. The Christian who loves God's people, has no lack of companions.

Worldly ambition is a statement about God's sufficiency. I need more money because God Himself is not enough. I need more popularity because the companions God has given me are not enough. The Bible says, this will disappoint you, abandon those ambitions. Repent of discontent. Get back into the Word of God and taste and see that the Lord Himself is good. Get your heart to the place where it says, Lord you yourself are enough for me, you are my portion.

**Psalms 73:25-26** *Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You.  
<sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

Get back to where you treasure the people of God.

**Psalms 122:1** *A Song of Ascents. Of David. I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the LORD."*

Discontentment comes from either being unsaved, or being a believer who seeks for satisfaction outside of God. God says to us, Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.