

ECCLESIASTES 4: 1 Then I returned and saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun: and behold, the tears of those who were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter.

The vanity of life is increased by oppression, Ecc 4:1-3; by envy, Ecc 4:4; by idleness, Ecc 4:5. The misery of a solitary life, and the advantages of society, Ecc 4:6-12. A poor and wise child; better than an old and foolish king, Ecc 4:13. The uncertainty of popular favor, Ecc 4:14-16.

Verse 1

Considered all the oppressions - עשוקים ashukim signifies any kind of injury which a man can receive in his person, his property, or his good fame.

On the side of their oppressors there was power - And, therefore, neither protection nor comfort for the oppressed.

ECCLESIASTES 4: 2 Therefore I praised the dead who have been long dead more than the living who are yet alive.

Verse 2

Wherefore I praised the dead - I considered those happy who had escaped from the pilgrimage of life to the place where the wicked cease from troubling, and where the weary are at rest.

ECCLESIASTES 4: 3 Yes, better than them both is him who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

Verse 3

Which hath not yet been - Better never to have been born into the world, than to have seen and suffered so many miseries.

ECCLESIASTES 4: 4 Then I saw all the labour and achievement that is the envy of a man's neighbour. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

Verse 4

For this a man is envied - It is not by injustice and wrong only that men suffer, but through envy also. For if a man act uprightly and properly in the world, he soon becomes the object of his neighbor's envy and calumny too. Therefore the encouragement to do good, to act an upright part, is very little. This constitutes a part of the vain and empty system of human life.

ECCLESIASTES 4: 5 The fool folds his hands together and ruins himself.

Verse 5

The fool foldeth his hands - After all, without labor and industry no man can get any comfort in life; and he who gives way to idleness is the veriest of fools.

ECCLESIASTES 4: 6 Better is a handful, with quietness, than two handfuls with labour and chasing after wind.

Verse 6

Better is a handful with quietness - These may be the words of the slothful man, and spoken in vindication of his idleness; as if he had said, "Every man who labors and amasses property is the object of envy, and is marked by the oppressor as a subject for spoil; better, therefore, to act as I do; gain little, and have little, and enjoy my handful with quietness." Or the words may contain Solomon's reflection on the subject.

ECCLESIASTES 4: 7 Then I returned and saw vanity under the sun.

ECCLESIASTES 4: 8 There is one who is alone, and he has neither son nor brother. There is no end to all of his labour, neither are his eyes satisfied with wealth. "For whom then, do I labour, and deprive my soul of enjoyment?" This also is vanity. Yes, it is a miserable business.

Verse 8

There is one alone, and there is not a second - Here covetousness and avarice are characterized. The man who is the center of his own existence; has neither wife, child, nor legal heir; and yet is as intent on getting money as if he had the largest family to provide for; nor does he only labor with intense application, but he even refuses himself the comforts of life out of his own gains! This is not only vanity, the excess of foolishness, but it is also sore travail.

ECCLESIASTES 4: 9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labour.

Verse 9

Two are better than one - Married life is infinitely to be preferred to this kind of life, for the very reasons alleged below, and which require no explanation.

ECCLESIASTES 4: 10 For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls, and doesn't have another to lift him up.

ECCLESIASTES 4: 11 Again, if two lie together, then they have warmth; but how can one keep warm alone?

ECCLESIASTES 4: 12 If a man prevails against one who is alone, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.

ECCLESIASTES 4: 13 Better is a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who doesn't know how to receive admonition any more.

Verse 13

Better is a poor and a wise child - The Targum applies this to Abraham. "Abraham was a poor child of only three years of age; but he had the spirit of prophecy, and he refused to worship the idols which the old foolish king - Nimrod - had set up; therefore Nimrod cast him into a furnace of fire. But the Lord worked a miracle and delivered him. Yet here was no knowledge in Nimrod, and he would not be admonished." The Targum proceeds:

ECCLESIASTES 4: 14 For out of prison he came out to be king; yes, even in his kingdom he was born poor.

Verse 14

For out of prison he cometh to reign - "Then Abraham left the country of the idolaters, where he had been imprisoned, and came and reigned over the land of Canaan; and Nimrod became poor in this world." This is the fact to which the ancient rabbins supposed Solomon to allude.

ECCLESIASTES 4: 15 I saw all the living who walk under the sun, that they were with the youth, the other, who succeeded him.

Verse 15

With the second child that shall stand up - The Targum applies this to the case of Jeroboam and Rehoboam. History affords many instances of mean persons raised to sovereign authority, and of kings being reduced to the meanest offices, and to a morsel of bread. Agrippa himself ascended the throne of Israel after having been long in prison. See Josephus, Ant. lib. 18: c. 8. This the heathens attributed to fortune.

Si fortuna volet, fiet de rhetore consul;

Si volet haec eadem, fiet de consule rhetor.

Juv. Sat. vii., ver. 197.

Though I have given what the Jews suppose to be the allusion in these verses, yet the reader may doubt whether the reference be correct. There is a case implied, whether from fact or assumption I cannot say; but it seems to be this:

A king who had abused the authority vested in him by oppressing the people, had a son whose prudent conduct promised much comfort to the nation, when he should come to the throne. The father, seeing the popular wish, and becoming jealous of his son, shut him up in prison. In the interim the old king either dies or is deposed, and the son is brought out of prison, and placed on the throne. Then (Ecc 4:15, Ecc 4:16) multitudes of the people flock to him, and begin to walk under the sun; i.e., the prosperous state to which the nation is raised by its redemption from the former tyranny. However, the wise man insinuates that this sunshine will not last long. The young king, feeling the reins in his own hands, and being surrounded by those whose interest it was to flatter in order to obtain and continue in court favor, he also becomes corrupted so that those who come after shall have no cause of rejoicing in him. This appears to be the case; and similar cases have frequently occurred, not only in Asiatic, but also in European history, I have, in another place, referred to the case of Rushn Achter, who was brought out of prison and set upon the throne of Hindoostan. This is expressed in the following elegant Persian couplet, where his fortune is represented as similar to that of the patriarch Joseph: - "The bright star is now become a moon:

Joseph is taken out of prison, and become a king."

Rushn Achter signifies a bright or splendid star.

ECCLESIASTES 4: 16 There was no end of all the people, even of all them over whom he was—yet those who come after shall not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Verse 16

There is no end of all the people - This is supposed to refer to the multitudes of people who hail the advent and accession of a new sovereign; for, as Suetonius remarks, *A plerisque adorari solem orientem*, "Most people adore the rising sun." But when the new king becomes old, very few regard him; and perhaps he lives long enough to be as much despised by the very persons who before were ready to worship him. This is also a miserable vanity. Thus the blooming heir: - "Shall feel the sad reverse: honored awhile;

Then, like his sire, contemn'd, abhorr'd, forgot."

C.