



Abundant Life in a Meaningless world – Part 4

Chapter 4 – All the Lonely People

As Solomon observed real people in real situations, he had to deal with some painful facts, like life and death, time and eternity, and the final judgment. Solomon recorded his observations from visiting different places and watching several people go through a variety of experiences. His conclusion was that life is anything but monotonous, for we have no idea what problems may come to us on any given day. No wonder he wrote, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth." (Prov. 27:1).

Again Solomon interrupts our world and cuts off our escape routes to remind us of the grim reality of life. For one in four that reality is the reality of loneliness. Solomon knows that there is more than one cause of loneliness. He introduces four situations in which loneliness is common and in the middle of it all he buries some clues to help people overcome it.

Loneliness caused by oppression (4:1-3)

Solomon went into a courtroom to watch a trial, and there he saw innocent people being oppressed by power-hungry officials. The victims wept, but their tears did no good. Nobody stood with them to comfort or assist them. The oppressors had all the power, and their victims were helpless to protest.

1. ☺ Have you ever been used, exploited or demoralized and how did you feel? _____

2. ☺ Give 2 examples of oppression of the weak? _____

3. What 2 things did Solomon observe about oppression (v. 1)? _____

a. *Power was on the side of the oppressor*

b. *The oppressed had no comforter*

4. What 2 conclusions did Solomon come to concerning oppression (vv. 2-3)? _____

a. *Praise the dead more than the living*

b. *Reason that better than both was never to be born*

- *The king witnessed three tragedies: (1) oppression and exploitation in the halls of justice; (2) pain and sorrow in the lives of innocent people; and (3) unconcern on the part of those who could have brought comfort.*
- *So devastated was Solomon by what he saw that he decided it was better to be dead than to be alive and oppressed. In fact, one was better off never having been born at all. Then one would never have to see the evil works of sinful man.*
- *Solomon sees little option but to despair.*
- *Verses 2 and 3 are the lowest point of the book.*

Loneliness caused through competitiveness (4:4-6)

The king went down to the marketplace to watch the various labourers at work. Surely he would not be disappointed there, for honest toil is a gift from God. Even Adam had work to do in the Garden (Gen. 2:15), and our Lord was a carpenter when He was here on earth (Mark 6:3). Solomon considered four different kinds of men.

5. ☺ What are the pros and cons of being competitive, give 1 example of each? _____

6. ☺ How are envy and loneliness related? _____

7. What 2 things did Solomon observe about toil and skilful work (v. 4)? _____

- a. *It prompted envy from one's neighbour*
- b. *It too was vanity and grasping for the wind*
- *It's in the commercial world that competition has its most spiritually debilitating effects. For many industries sheer survival dictates unhealthy competition. It causes us to live in the rat race - which is fine for rats but not for human beings!*
- *The thirst for more, the lust for better, the desire to achieve, even if it means trampling on someone else in the process, the drive to be one up, is in us all.*
- *Socially, envy comes between us and our neighbours and cuts us off. We are no longer able to enjoy friendship because either we haven't the time, we are too busy, or we have just stuck a commercial knife in our neighbour's back. Competition destroys relationships and leads to loneliness.*
- *We are fed the "losers and winners" mantra day in and day out. The gold medal is the only one that matters in the Olympics. People know they will be judged, not so much on the content of their character, but on how good a school they get into, how much money they make, how big their house is, how pricey their car, how many credentials they can put on their resume.*
- *God did not put this "selfishness factor" into human labour; it's the result of sin in the human heart. We covet what others have; we not only want to have those things, but we want to go beyond and have even more. Covetousness, competition, and envy often go together. Competition is not sinful of itself, but when "being first" is more important than being honest, there will be trouble.*

8. How does Solomon describe the fool who doesn't work, and what is he trying to say (v. 5)? _____

- a. *As one who folds his hands and consumes his own flesh*
- *So what's the answer? The temptation is to over-react: to say that if competition and the economic system based on it are so wicked the best thing to do is to drop out. They don't look for a job, they don't put themselves in the marketplace and they carefully shun the rat race. It comes as something of a shock to hear Solomon call such people fools and denounce them as on the path to ruin.*

9. What is better than both hands full with toil and chasing after the wind? (v. 6) _____

- a. *One handful with tranquillity (peace) striving for less will give you peace, no race, no competition.*
- *Here was a man whose life was balanced: he was productive in his work, but he was also careful to take time for quietness. He did not run in the rat race, but neither did he try to run away from the normal responsibilities of life.*
- *The industrious man thinks that money will bring him peace, but he has no time to enjoy it. The idle man thinks that doing nothing will bring him peace, but his lifestyle only destroys him. The integrated man enjoys both his labour and the fruit of his labour and balances toil with rest. You can take what you want from life, but you must pay for it.*

Loneliness caused by isolation (4:7-8)

Then Solomon noticed a solitary man, very hard at work, so he went to question him. The king discovered that the man had no relatives or partners to help him in his business, nor did he desire any help.

10. © Give an example how people may deal with loneliness? _____

11. What is described as vanity and a grave misfortune? (vv. 7-8) _____

- a. *One who is alone, who labours endlessly for riches that do not satisfy*
 - b. *Who never considers for whom he is toiling and depriving himself of much good*
- *He wanted all the profit for himself. But he was so busy, he had no time to enjoy his profits. And, if he died, he had no family to inherit his wealth. In other words, all his labour was in vain.*
 - *He draws the picture of a man who desperately wants a companion but none is available. Probably as a result, the man buries himself in work. The trouble is that that only rubs salt in his wounds. He successfully makes money and then realizes that he has no-one to share it with. So what's the point? The sense of loneliness increases.*
 - *We could argue that this man had set himself the wrong agenda to begin with; that he was too independent early in life; too concerned to get ahead; too unbending or dominating in his relationships with others; or too shy; or too afraid to risk a relationship in case he was hurt by it. Perhaps. Such possibilities need to be faced. Loneliness sometimes does occur because people build up walls around them which others cannot penetrate. But it is not always so.*
 - *Some are lonely through no fault of their own.*

Loneliness caused by power (4: 13-16)

Solomon introduces a story that teaches two truths: the instability of political power and the uncertainty of popularity. The king in the story had at one time heeded his counsellors' advice and ruled wisely, but when he got old, he refused to listen to them.

12. ☺ Give an example of how popularity can lead to loneliness? _____

13. What is Solomon's answer to those in high positions and who abuse power (v. 13)? _____

- a. *Better a poor wise youth... , He points to the value of true wisdom.*

14. How does Solomon illustrate the pride of popularity? (13-16) _____

- a. *With the example of a youth who becomes king, but as he gets older he is not appreciated by the people who come afterward*
- *The problem was more than pride and senility. He was probably surrounded by a collection of "parasites" who flattered him, isolated him from reality, and took from him all they could get. This often happens to weak leaders who are more concerned about themselves than about their people.*
- *The young man was born poor, but he became rich. The old king was rich, but it didn't make him any wiser, so he might just as well have been poor. The young man was in prison, but he got out and took the throne. The old king was imprisoned in his stupidity (and within his circle of sycophants) and lost his throne. So far, the moral of the story is wealth and position are no guarantee of success, and poverty and seeming failure are no barriers to achievement. The key is wisdom.*
- *It looked like the new young king had it made, but alas, his popularity didn't last. "He can become the leader of millions of people and be very popular. But, then, the younger generation grows up around him and rejects him!"*

Loneliness: is there an answer? (4:9-12)

Solomon does give two clues as to how loneliness can be overcome. He doesn't develop them into techniques and therapies as we would want him to do today. But at least he sets us on the right road. We saw that he points to the value of true wisdom (verse 13) and now he points to the value of human companionship (verses 9-12).

15. ☺ How important has friendship been for you in dealing with difficulties? _____

16. What 5 things does Solomon give to illustrate the value of friendship? (vv. 9-12)? _____

- a. - *Two working together accomplish more (the principle of synergy)*
- b. - *Having someone to help you if you fall*
- c. - *Surviving a cold night by sharing body heat*
- d. - *Two can withstand one*
- e. - *A threefold cord is not easily broken*
- *Charles Swindoll summarizes the advantages of a companion in such circumstances. A companion provides:*
 - i. *Mutual encouragement when we are weak,*
 - ii. *Mutual support when we are vulnerable,*
 - iii. *Mutual protection when we are attacked."*
- *How wonderful to have a friend who can help you up (or out). But if this applies to our physical falls, how much more does it apply to those times when we stumble in our spiritual walk and need restoration (Gal. 6:1-2)? How grateful we should be for Christian friends who help us walk straight.*
- *One cord could be broken easily; two cords would require more strength; but three cords woven together could not be easily broken. If two travellers are better than one, then three would fare even better. Solomon had more than numbers in mind; he was also thinking of the unity involved in three cords woven together—what a beautiful picture of friendship!*