

Solomon's Twelve Secrets

Session 4: If This Shoe Fits Don't Wear It!

Edited Transcript

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Good morning men. So please turn in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes 4. As we're in the series Solomon's 12 Secrets, lessons on life from Ecclesiastes and we'll kick it off here with a shout out. Today we're going to give a shout out to the Friday morning men's Bible study, okay? They're led by Albert McCullough in Vorhees. I'm hope I'm saying that correctly, New Jersey. Albert describes them as a group of men whose purpose is to lead others to God. They're meeting on Fridays at 9:00 a.m. using our video Bible study and so I wonder if you would give me a very warm, rousing man in the mirror welcome to Friday morning Men's Bible study. One, two, three, hooah. Welcome men. We're glad to have you with us. Okay.

So, just a little bit of catching us up on where we are. So Solomon who was the wisest only human man who ever lived. Now, Jesus was the wisest man who ever lived, but he was not only human. We understand from the Bible that Jesus was fully man and fully God. He was the man-God or the God-man. But Solomon, it says in the Bible, other than Jesus then, is the wisest man, the only man who's just a man, that ever lived.

He wrote this book Ecclesiastes because he wanted to study and explore everything that's done in the earth. Essentially to save you and I the trouble of having to go through all of the twists and turns that lead down wrong paths to get to the right path eventually, hopefully. After doing this, he said that he found everything to be meaningless, a chasing after the wind. So in the first chapter, we saw a conclusion formed by Solomon that apart from God, life has no meaning. That was the big idea.

Then, in the second chapter, Solomon set out to figure out what is it that's worthwhile for a man to do during the few days of life that he has? We learned that even if you get exactly what you want, you still will not be happy without God. We saw how Solomon got everything he ever wanted and still wasn't happy. He said, "I hated my life." Then in the third chapter, he said, and we learned at the end of the second chapter, we learned that it is good for man to eat and drink and find pleasure or happiness in his toil, in his work.

Then in the third chapter, Solomon said, "Okay, so what does a man get for his toil?" We looked at the rhythms of creation, and we saw how God puts burdens on men, but he also gives men that which is beautiful. He set eternity in our hearts, but no man can change anything that God has set in place. He's done this so that men will revere him and so our big idea from the last time was, what was our big idea from the last time? What was the big idea for the last time? Somebody? God will not force you to revere him. He won't, but he will make it impossible for you to be happy unless you do.

That brings us now to Ecclesiastes chapter 4 and the title of, I wonder why that's there. Oh, it was there because I was going to show you these as I was going through this review. So these are the big ideas. Apart from God, life has no meaning. If you get exactly what you want, you still will not be happy

without God and God will not force you to revere him but he will make it impossible for you to be happy unless you do.

That brings us today to a topic, we're going to call this, **"If this shoe fits, don't wear it."** Why do we come here, to this Bible study? One way of describing it is that we are all trying to construct a narrative or a story that makes sense of our lives. We're all trying to figure out how to take what seemed to be like these random bits and pieces and is there some kind of a narrative or some kind of a story that makes sense of all this so that it resonates with us? Sometimes we would call that a worldview or a meta-narrative. There's lots of different ways to do it. Today, we'll just call it a narrative.

THE PROBLEM WITH NARRATIVES

The first thing I want us to talk about today is just the problem with narratives. The problem with narratives is that they're often wrong. About the time we started this Bible study, I was having problems with my feet. It was difficult, it hurt to walk. I'm a very ... I'll go ahead and say it. I'm a very proud person, okay. I want to appear like I'm overcoming, like I'm strong. Like I got it together. I would walk normal. I wouldn't walk in a way that gave any hint that something was wrong, but every step I took, I was in pain.

I did a lot of things. Today you can buy orthotics to put in your shoes that are technical and very, very good over the counter. When we started the Bible study, those hadn't quite developed yet. So I went and I had custom orthotics made for my shoes. I just wasn't comfortable. I kept buying different kinds of shoes, trying to find a more comfortable pair of shoes. This brand didn't work, so I'd by another brand that I heard was more comfortable. That didn't work. I would then buy another brand that I heard was more comfortable.

Finally, I heard about one brand of shoe that, and I read all that they had to say about it, the marketing stuff. I decided to give that shoe a try because they basically promised they would take care of all my problems. So I bought this particular brand of shoe. I put them on and I took about 10 steps and I said I have made a huge mistake here. These are the most uncomfortable shoes I have ever worn in my life, and they were.

I went to my closet and I got one of the shoes, the previous shoes, the previous comfortable shoes and I put it on, and I walked with the new shoe and the old shoe together, and I said, yeah, the old shoe is a lot more comfortable. Then I got an even earlier generation of comfortable shoe and I put it on, and I said even this older, previously less comfortable shoe is a lot more comfortable than this new shoe.

In a huff, I went back to the shoe store. I said, "What's going on here?" I told them the story. The owner of the store came out because I was making a ruckus. Not that kind, not a bad ruckus. I mean, honestly I don't do that bad ruckus stuff. I'll leave that to you guys. He had heard me explain the problem, and he came to the counter. He said, "Let me tell you what's going on here." He said the problem is, is that Americans, we equate comfort as the goal but in Europe, and these are European shoes, in Europe the way that they solve this problem is by having shoes that have the proper structure.

Wear these shoes for a while and see if they don't help. Well, my problems went away almost instantly with shoes that had the proper structure. I constructed in my mind a narrative that said that if I can just

find shoes that are comfortable enough, that will solve my problems. Actually, the solution that I was pursuing was making it worse and worse and worse. We do this all the time.

We construct narratives in our mind that we believe to be true, but they're not. Now this is not the big idea for the day because this is an application oriented Bible study, right? But if this was a philosophically oriented Bible study, I would have made this the big idea for the day. Just because you believe a narrative doesn't make it true, any more than not believing a narrative makes it false. All right?

What did I just do? Did I just do something? Oh my battery's running low. All right, who said that? Who said that? All right. What are some of those narratives? For example, father-wound. I have seen now that one of the dominant narratives among Christian men is the father-wound. I think there is obviously an element of truth to this. I think for some men, it's the absolute truth, but let me say this. A lot of men don't even have fathers, but let me say this. What I've now seen in my own life is that what I thought was my dad's fault is just the way the world works. It's just the way the world works.

I now have an appreciation for how hard my dad was trying. You can't get what you don't have. You've heard that saying today, and my dad didn't have a father. So when I look at, the legacy of some men is measured by how far they go, but the legacy of my father is better measured by how far he came, because he did a really great job considering the fact that he didn't have a dad.

Then I also see how difficult it was for me to raise children, how difficult it was for me to keep it all together, and I now have a much more gracious narrative in my mind about what was going on in my dad's life. One of our area directors just had his father die, and he wrote me an email, and I could just feel the anger and the bitterness towards his father for the father-wound, and I wrote him back. I said, "You know when my dad died I felt the same way that you did. But it was interesting in the years that have followed, I've mellowed and softened a lot on that, and I just want you to know that our dads love us and they were doing the best they could in most cases. Did they make mistakes? Yes, but now we will see in our own lives that we too make mistakes." Anyway, it's just the narrative that gets reconstructed.

I'm going to filibuster while we get the ... Okay, there it is. I don't need to filibuster. We're going to learn here from Solomon, the truth is still true whether you believe it or not. One of our former board members at Man in the Mirror was telling me he's been ministering to a man who doesn't believe in Christianity, but then he went to Israel. He came back and said this is the best trip my wife and I have ever been on. He said, "I'm still not quite sure whether or not I fully embrace Christianity, but now, one thing I am sure, absolutely certain of, Jesus did exist. Jesus was a real person. I mean there's not question about that. That's absolutely true." So his narrative got a little bit reconstructed. How are we doing over here? Sort of?

Speaker 2: We're going to be without a laptop.

Oh well that's okay. Here's the Big Idea for the day. I'm going to talk to us about the different kinds of, some different footwear that Solomon tried out. You might want to write this one down. The Big Idea today is this. **In just 30 minutes of painless study, we can learn what took Solomon 30 years of painful experience.** In just 30 minutes of painless, we can learn what took Solomon 30 years of painful experience.

4 NARRATIVES THAT WILL NEVER FIT

So the next circle, if you would write in that four narratives that we'll never fit, four narratives that we'll never fit. Then we're going to turn our attention to Ecclesiastes chapter 4, verse 1. Again now, for those of you who are writing this down, the big idea, in 30 minutes of painless study, we can learn what it took Solomon 30 years of painful experience. Then the circle here, four narratives that we'll never fit.

In the book of Ecclesiastes chapter 4, at verses 1 through 3, we see at verse 1, "Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place." This first narrative is the narrative of oppression, or social injustice. Then just to give you the outline, verses 4 through 6, in verse 4 he says, "And I saw all the labor and achievement that spring from man's envy of his neighbor." So the first thing he saw was oppression. The second thing he saw was that achievement and labor spring from man's envy of his neighbor.

Then, over, verses 7 to 12, "Again I saw something meaningless under the sun. A man all alone," so isolation. We have oppression. We have misguided motives. We have isolation. Then, in verses 13 through 16, it says, down at 15 it says, "I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed a poor but wise youth," and how it's better to be a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king, who no longer knows how to take warning. In other words, pride. Letting pride end up consuming your life.

No let's go back and start at verse 1. It says, "I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun. I saw the tears of the oppressed." I was thinking about this. You know, the tears of the oppressed. You've had someone on your case so bad, you've had this happen, that you privately collapsed in a puddle of tears over that. It may have been an employer. It may have been a family member. It could have been a parent. It could have been a spouse. It could have been a child. Children can oppress parents too you know.

He said, "I saw the tears of the oppressed and they have no comforter." And they have no comforter. Power was on the side of their oppressors, and they have no comforter. He's still talking about the people who have these tears. "And I declared that the dead who had already died are happier than the living who are still alive, but better ..." Remember he said he's looking for something. What is it that's worthwhile? That's the same Hebrew word here, better or more worthwhile, than both is he who has not yet been, who has not yet seen the evil that is done under the heavens. The evil that is done under the heavens.

This is very interesting because this Hebrew word for evil here, it's the same, it's the same evil that is the tree in the Garden of Eden, that is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It's that same evil. When Solomon, it's also the same evil when Jacob's brothers sold him into slavery and he said later, "You meant it for harm." It's the same Hebrew word. You meant it for evil but God meant it for good. It's the same concept.

There's an element that this is probably somewhat autobiographical too, because Solomon had said in it that he had had a vision from God, a dream from God and God had asked him for whatever he wanted, and what did he ask for? He asked for the wisdom to do what? To discern what? Good and what? Evil. God said I'm going to grant your request. So Solomon understood the difference between good and evil, but then Solomon himself did evil. In 1 Kings chapter 11, when Solomon became an older man, his many wives turned his heart after other gods and he did what was evil. This same evil.

There's probably some autobiographical. This is not just observing other people. I didn't say that nearly as well as I wanted to, but anyway, you get the general idea. Then down at verse 4, "And I saw that all

labor and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. The fool folds his hands and ruins his life better," and again that's that same word worthwhile, more worthwhile. "One handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil, and chasing after the wind."

You have these misguided motives. Men striving to achieve. I mean, again I don't like having to admit this to you guys, but I have done this. I mean, I have done this in a very significant way. Wanting to be the man. Wanting to be the successful guy. Comparing my achievements to others. Well what is that? That's what this is right here in this text.

That's a narrative that is false. It's a shoe that doesn't fit. Oppressing people to get what you want. That's a shoe, that's a narrative that some of us have that we can get ahead by walking over people that in order for me to win, you need to lose. That is a narrative and Solomon says it's meaningless, it's evil, it's a chasing after the wind, as is this idea of having these messed up motives. Then in verse 7, we see the third narrative. "Again I saw," so I saw, I saw, I saw, I saw. "Again I saw something meaningless under the sun. 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 asked, and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment or that which is worthwhile?" Again that word. "This too is meaningless, a miserable business."

I was one day riding along and I saw a bumper sticker. It said "Contents under pressure." Contents under pressure. I think that's a perfect example of what's going on here. This problem of being, putting yourself in isolation. Self-exile if you will. It goes on to say in verse 9, two are better than one for they have a good return for their work. We'll come back to this in a little bit.

Then down in verse 13, a fourth narrative. Thinking that there's, it's basically trying to be somebody. Better a poor man with a what? I'll start over. "Better a poor man but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning. Youth may have come from prison to the kingship or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. I saw that all who lived and walked under the son followed the youth, the king's successor. There was no end to all the people who were before them. But, those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind."

The glories of power and success, that's another false narrative. What are some of the false narratives that we follow today? What are some of the false narratives that are out there? Well of these but there are others too. What are some of the other narratives that are false, that are not true, or possibly not true? I just can't be happy with this woman. I will never be happy with this woman. In order for me to be happy, I need to be with another woman. That is one of the dominant narratives that we have in our culture today.

We've already talked about what's happening to me, it's my parent's fault. It's their responsibility. I'm not responsible for what's happened to me. It's my parent's fault. That's another narrative that's out there. Another one that's out there, if I could just make this much money, then I would be happy. If I could just get that job, then I would be happy. If I could just get my kids into this private school, then I would be happy. If I could just live in that neighborhood, then, then, then I would be happy. If I could just get accepted into this club, then, then I would be happy. I'm not happy now, but if I could just get that, then I would be happy.

I've had these narratives, all of these narratives bouncing around my life from time to time. I'm sure you can relate as well, but the big idea today is that in 30 minutes of painless study, we can learn from Solomon what took him 30 years of painful experience. We don't have to go through all of those experiences. In our third circle, so our first circle is the problem with narratives. The second is four narratives that will never fit, and then a few others that I added, and then the third circle are two narratives that will never wear out. Two shoes that will never wear out.

2 NARRATIVES THAT WILL NEVER WEAR OUT

Verse 6 says this, "Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind." Oh my goodness, what's this? This is Paul's to be content in any and every circumstance. This is the, my first narrative was that money will solve my problems and success will make me happy. If I could just make this much money, then I will be happy. If I could just have this much success then I'll be happy. It never, I actually got the money that I wanted and the success that I wanted, but I was still not happy. That's why I liked Ecclesiastes so much. Because he got everything he ever wanted and still wasn't happy. I got everything I ever wanted. I really did. I got everything I ever wanted.

Some of you know this. I've led a very big life, a large life. None of which has made me happy. None of that has made me happy. What's made me happy are a few simple things. Being able to stand in front of God and instead of saying, oh God I'm so glad that I'm not like all these other sinners, what brings me joy is to be able to stand in front of God and beat my breast and not even be willing to look up, but like the publican say, "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner." That simple pleasure, that simple pleasure of experiencing the love, the grace, the mercy and the forgiveness of Jesus every day. I have to do this every day, by the way. So do you, by the way.

To be content, to be content with what God has chosen to give us, that's, that's one protection, that's one narrative that will help you stay on the path that's true. The second one here starts in verse 9, "Two are better than one for they have a good return for their work. If one falls down, his friend can help him up." It's the idea of having a few friends in your life. A few men, the pleasantness of one's friends springs from his earnest counsel. As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another, and so forth.

If one falls down, his friend can help him up, but pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up. This is a narrative that's, that will never wear out. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up. Also if two lie down together, they will keep warm. This was cold nights in the desert. This was the common way of fighting off the cold of the night. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves, and a cord of three strands is not quickly broken. It's relationships.

One narrative that will always fit is the narrative of being content with what you have. Whatever it is. It doesn't mean you don't have goals and you're not trying to get somewhere, but if you only think that you'll become content when you get where you want to go and you're not content where you are, when you get where you want to go, you're not going to be content either. That's just the law. To be content, and then the second one here is to do life with a few brothers. To do life with a few brothers because if you don't, you will put on a shoe that doesn't fit. But if you have some brothers who care about you, they will push back on you. They will push back on you.

Again, today, the Big Idea. We can learn here from Solomon in 30 minutes of painless study what took him 30 years of painful experience to understand. Let us pray. Our dearest Father, Lord we are so grateful for this book of Ecclesiastes because it's filled with these timeless truths that are so applicable to our lives today. So we pray Lord that you would take the words that are in these pages and on these devices and that you would tutor them to our hearts in a way that we might not be following a narrative or believing a narrative that is going to lead us to a place we don't want to go. Help us to be content, understand that, and help us to do life with a few brothers. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.