

## Ecclesiastes 4:7-12

Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:

<sup>8</sup> 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?"  
 This too is meaningless—  
 a miserable business!

<sup>9</sup> Two are better than one,  
 because they have a good return for their work:

<sup>10</sup> If one falls down,  
 his friend can help him up.  
 But pity the man who falls  
 and has no one to help him up!

<sup>11</sup> Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.  
 But how can one keep warm alone?

<sup>12</sup> Though one may be overpowered,  
 two can defend themselves.  
 A cord of three strands is not quickly broken (Ecclesiastes 4).

When a newly married woman arrived home from work one day the smell of fresh paint assailed her nostrils. As she entered the lounge room she could see it had been freshly painted, but she was startled to find her husband lying on the floor in a pool of sweat. She asked him if he was okay. He said, "Yes." She then asked him why he was wearing at the same time both a ski jacket and a leather jacket. He replied, "Oh, that's because it said on the paint can: For best results put on two coats."

Simon and Lindsay have asked me to preach on the passage I have just read from the book of Ecclesiastes, a passage which stresses that two is better than one. Two coats are better than one for a good paint job, but the husband in my silly story didn't interpret the words on the paint can properly. As this passage from Ecclesiastes 4 says, "Two are better than one", but if we don't interpret these words properly we will be far more stupid than the idiot painter.

Those familiar with the book of Ecclesiastes will know that the writer, who calls himself, "the Teacher", uses a lot of black paint. Over and over again he says "everything is meaningless." The book even begins on this seemingly depressing note:  
 The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

Did you notice how the passage Simon and Lindsay picked begins and ends with exactly the same refrain? So verse 7 states: "*Again I saw something meaningless under the sun*", and in verse 16 we read: "*This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*"

Plato defined man as a "being in search of meaning." Indeed, people have always sought meaning in relationships, however successfully or tragically this might turn out. Tim Keller says the most important relationships for the traditional person are their family, for the modern person it is their lovers, and for the postmodern person it is

their friends - because their families and lovers have let them down! The book of Ecclesiastes is written not to despair of meaning, but to clarify what it is that gives life true meaning. At the end of the book he explains that there is only one relationship in life that gives our lives any real meaning. If that relationship is not right then everything we do in our lives, including getting married, is pointless, worthless, meaningless.

What is this one relationship that we must get right if our lives are to have any real meaning or purpose? The very last verses of the book of Ecclesiastes spell it out for us:

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil (12:13-14).

Simon and Lindsay's marriage is meaningless unless they make their relationship with God their highest priority. The whole duty or obligation or responsibility of man, that is, of people, is to "*fear God and keep his commandments*". What does it mean to fear God? Well, the very last sentence of the book gives us the essential clue: "*For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.*" To fear God means to live my life knowing that one day I will stand before him and he will judge my life, assessing everything I have ever done and said and thought. This will include "every hidden thing", including actions, words and thoughts of which others are unaware and even including some things about myself that perhaps I have refused to acknowledge.

As Paul told the intellectuals of the Greek Areopagus:

[God] has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:31).

Deny it at your peril, but it is the claim of the Bible that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a demonstrable and undeniable historical fact. This Jesus, the risen Lord, will be your judge on the Day of Judgment. Whether your life or mine has meaning or not will be assessed on that day and what Jesus will be looking for is evidence that you fear God and obey him, including obeying his command to place your trust in Jesus who died so that you might be forgiven for all you have ever done, said or thought which rejects God or distorts who he is or trivializes him.

Mitch Albom, the writer of the very moving book *Tuesdays with Morrie*, says, "*The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to the community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose and meaning.*" This might sound nice but it is sentimental nonsense. If you live your life without taking God's will and the coming judgment seriously then your whole life is utterly pointless and meaningless because you will fail the final examination when it comes. But if you are serious about living a life that pleases and honours God and preparing yourself for the inevitable day of judgment, through utter dependence on Jesus, then you will pass the final examination.

From our passage in Ecclesiastes 4 we learn that human companionship is part of our Creator's design for our lives. When the writer - let's say Solomon - says "Two are better than one" he is saying that being just one, being alone is meaningless:

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?" This too is meaningless— a miserable business! (vv7-8).

Here we have the sad story of a person without any human relationship of any kind - no friend, no business partner, no wife, no son, no brother. He is a lonely miser, like Dickens' Scrooge. It is this kind of meaningless, pointless existence which leads the Teacher to say "Two are better than one".

Simon and Lindsay, the first benefit of being married, as we see in verse 9, is that as the two of you work together you can reap greater benefits than by working alone.

C.S. Lewis says,

That is why those pathetic people who simply "want friends" can never make any. The very condition of having friends is that we should want something else besides friends... Those who have nothing can share nothing, those who are going nowhere can have no fellow travelers.

Marriage is not about getting your partner to work for you. We might not think of the actor Burt Reynolds as a great sage, but he once wisely observed that "Marriage is about the most expensive way for the average man to get laundry done." Make sure you are both working to achieve something greater than either of you or both of you put together; something that will greatly honour and please the Lord.

Simon and Lindsay, you also need to think of getting married as like setting out on a journey together - that's the encouragement of verses 10-12. If you travel alone and are in the middle of nowhere and fall down, say into a pit, or fall so as to injure yourself badly then death might be staring you in the face. But if you fall while journeying together then your lover comes to your rescue. You've both had enough experience of life to know that there may well be a time when the one you love will fall into a hole, a time of suffering and distress. Remembering again that you are living your life in preparation for the time when you will answer to God make sure it is your firm resolve now to stand by each other no matter what life throws at you.

Emperor Penguins in the Antarctica huddle together in temperatures of -60 to -80 degrees celcius to stay alive. Simon and Lindsay, another benefit of traveling together is that you can set up your tent on a cold night and get into your sleeping bags and snuggle together. Of course, the Teacher's image is simply that two traveling companions can make the most of shared bodily heat. There is nothing sexual in his imagery but physical intimacy is certainly one of the great blessings of marriage.

Simon and Lindsay, now that you are married to each other you need to look out for each other and protect each other from those who would hurt you. The last benefit of having a traveling companion is that you are in a much better position to defend yourself against thieves and much more vulnerable if you travel alone.

So for these reasons "two are better than one." The phrase "two are better than one" alludes to a phrase used in Genesis 2:18, namely, "*it is not good for man to be alone.*" Paul quotes from Genesis 2 in Ephesians 5 when he says: "*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.*" Marriage is more than the companionship described in Ecclesiastes 4. It is

clearly an intensely intimate relationship - one God intended to be rich and fulfilling, central to the enjoyment of life in Paradise. Simon and Lindsay as man and wife you are one flesh. It is a profound mystery, Paul says, when Simon leaves Barbara and myself and unites himself with Lindsay with Simon and Lindsay becoming one flesh. Paul explains, "I am talking about Christ and the church." God created marriage so that you might better understand the nature of the relationship between Jesus and the church, between Jesus and the people he loved so much that he died to save them. Simon and Lindsay, what are the implications of this for your own marriage relationship? Paul spells it out in his very next statement: "However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband." Simon love Lindsay as you love yourself and Lindsay respect and honour Simon as your husband.

It is wonderful to see your great love for each other. But your marriage is meaningless and pointless if you are only absorbed in each other at the expense of being absorbed in God, as many popular songs foolishly encourage you to be. There must be something that your love for each other is about, something greater than either of you or the two of you put together. Remember at the end of the day God's opinion is the only opinion that counts; that you will one day stand before the Lord Jesus Christ who, as 2 Corinthians 5:15 reminds us: "*died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*" Make sure that you both live to please the Lord Jesus and obey him and that to this end you work together, are there for each other when one of you falls, keep each other warm, and seek to protect each other from harm.