

## “Alone at the Top” (Ecclesiastes 4:4-16)

*Karoshi* is a Japanese word which means “death from overwork.” The syndrome is now so common in Japan that it claims as many as 30,000 victims each year. Its increase has caused such concern that since 1990, the Japanese government has been forced to provide restitution to *karoshi* widows.<sup>1</sup> As Americans, we hear this and we think to ourselves, “That’s crazy! What are these poor people thinking?” Yet, all the while many of us are working ourselves to death, either literally or figuratively. The question is, “Why?” What is driving us to work so hard and so long? Our natural temptation may be to claim, “I work hard and long to glorify God.” This may be true, but I would suggest for most of us it is only partially true. If the truth be known, many of us are working hard to climb the corporate ladder, to impress our boss, to meet our own expectations, and to make more money. However, working long and hard for these reasons can lead to bitter disappointment and possibly even a premature death. If you don’t believe me, just ask the Japanese people.

Fortunately, Solomon has a solution for us. In Eccl 4:4-16, he encourages us to *work smarter not harder and longer*. How do we *work smarter not harder*? We *work smarter not harder* by making three specific choices.

**1. Choose contentment over achievement (4:4-6).** When I was growing up my dad would always tell me, “Moderation in everything.” Solomon imparts this same truth in these first three verses. He discusses the workaholic, the lazy sluggard, and then strikes the biblical balance between these two extremes. In 4:4 he writes, **“I have seen that every labor and every skill<sup>2</sup> which is done is the result of rivalry between a man and his neighbor. This too is vanity and striving after wind.”**<sup>3</sup> Solomon once again observes life. He is a student of human nature and activity. In his “people watching,” Solomon discovers that people compete with one another in everything. The twofold use of the word “every” undoubtedly means every type of labor and achievement rather than every individual instance of these things. The point is: much achievement is the result of a desire to be superior over others. We live in a constant state of competition. Research indicates that nine out of ten office workers suffer from “professional envy” of colleagues they perceive to have more glamorous or better paid jobs.<sup>4</sup> What drives many people is to climb the corporate ladder and outdo others.

This quest to get ahead is also true in other areas of our lives. We want to be more successful than our neighbors and friends. The clothes that you’re wearing right now, you’re not wearing because you needed them but because you wanted others to see you in them. You didn’t purchase that new car because you needed a car; you purchased that car because you wanted to be seen in that vehicle. Solomon is saying that we all want to be noticed and we want to be the focus of attention. Therefore, we envy one another and compete with one another. Whether we care to admit it or not rivalry is a driving force in all of us.

Some of us realize the evils of envy and rivalry and determine that we will be different. We don’t want to be the kind of people who step on everyone else on our climb to the top so we drop out of any competitive endeavor. Yet, this is a dangerous extreme as well.<sup>5</sup> In 4:5, Solomon shares a proverb:<sup>6</sup> **“The fool folds his hands and consumes [lit. “eats”] his own flesh.”** The language of this verse means lazy people eventually make cannibals of themselves.<sup>7</sup> They will kill themselves with starvation. Of course, Solomon is being sarcastic and he is using hyperbole. He mocks the lazy! Since they do not raise any crops, they must eat their own flesh.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1960s, one generation got sick of the affluence of the 1950s. So this group bailed out and claimed the title of “flower children.” Everybody gave up ambition and the drive for financial success. They let their hair grow long, quit bathing, and just sat on the grass and hummed.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, this is not the way to accomplish God’s purposes in the world. I would dare say this is sheer laziness and foolishness.

Reflecting on foolishness, please give careful attention to the word “fool” in 4:5. When we read the word “fool” in the Bible, it is natural to assume that the term means “idiot” or “buffoon.” After all, this is what our English word “fool” means. Yet, the biblical meaning of this word means something far worse. A fool is someone who denies God, scoffs at wisdom, and laughs at eternity. Foolishness is a theological stance, a show of contempt for God’s laws.<sup>10</sup>

God intends for mankind to work, particularly the church. This is why our church emphasizes the importance of a godly work ethic. We believe that everyone who is physically, mentally, and emotionally able should work. Paul said it best when he wrote to the church at Thessalonica, “If anyone will not work, neither let him eat” (2 Thess 3:10). Elsewhere, Paul said, “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men” (Col 3:23). The Bible is clear that we are to represent Christ in our work.

One day a mother walked in on her six-year-old son and found him sobbing. What’s the matter?” she asks. The boy replied, “I’ve just figured out how to tie my shoes.” “Well, honey, that’s wonderful. You’re growing up, but why are you crying?” “Because,” he says, “Now I’ll have to do it every day for the rest of my life.”<sup>11</sup> Maybe you feel like this six-year-old boy. You’re a stay-at-home mom and you’ve recognized that you’re going to be doing the same tasks for what may seem the rest of your life. Perhaps you work a monotonous job, day in and day out, and it kills you to know that you may be working this job for the rest of your life. God wants you to know that there is glory in the grind. Shrug off laziness. Work like today is your last day of work, for it just might be. *Work smarter not harder.*

Solomon now strikes a balance between workaholicism and laziness. His solution in 4:6 is: **“One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.”** At first glance, it seems 4:6 contradicts 4:5; however, we must recognize that 4:6 like 4:5 is a proverb.<sup>12</sup> The comparison is between anything with rest and anything with work.<sup>13</sup> This is not an argument in favor of laziness but a call for balanced living.<sup>14</sup> Blessed are the balanced! The wise person realizes that some things matter more than other things, that your career is not the measure of your self-worth, that having more money can’t replace the joy of spending time with people you love. Contentment means that you have everything you need right now. If you needed more, God would give it to you.<sup>15</sup> Solomon is saying, “Rather than grasping for so much that you have to be a workaholic to get it, be content with less. It is better to have less and enjoy it more.” Our problem is not the high cost of living; it is the cost of high living. We want far too much. The cure is contentment, being willing to settle for less materially if it means we can have some “rest.”

A new store opened at Minnesota’s Mall of America, called *MinneNAPolis*. It rents comfy spots where weary shoppers can take naps for seventy cents a minute. The new store includes themed rooms such as Asian Mist, Tropical Isle, and Deep Space, and the walls are thick enough to drown out the sounds of squealing children outside. The company’s website says, “Escape the pressures of the real world into the pleasures of an ideal one.” Some guests will want to listen to music, put their feet up, watch the water trickling in the beautiful stone waterfall, breathe in the positive-ionization-filtered air, enjoy the full-body massager, and just take an enjoyable escape from the fast-paced lifestyle.<sup>16</sup>

Do you ever get tired of running in the rat race where only the rats win? A sign by the roadside carried this message: “I’m getting sick of the rat race. The rats keep getting bigger and faster.” How much more could we enjoy life if we were content with what the Lord has given us? How many families would cease to be divided and destroyed if parents stopped breaking their necks to give their kids a better life than they had? Let me close this section by giving you 4:6 in the Keith Krell Translation: “Rather than putting two hands in for eighty hours a week, why don’t you put in forty hours with one hand and with the other eat some bubble gum ice cream?”<sup>17</sup> *Work smarter not harder.*

[Not only must we choose contentment over achievement, we must also...]

**2. Choose relationships over riches (4:7-12).** These verses remind us that people should be our priority. If you are too busy for the people in your life that matter most, you are too busy. In 4:7-8 Solomon writes, **“Then I looked again at vanity under the sun. There was a certain man without a dependent, having neither a son nor a brother, yet there was no end to all his labor. Indeed, his eyes were not satisfied with riches and he never asked, ‘And for whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?’ This too is vanity and it is a grievous task.”** Do you know anyone like this? Of course you do! With that person in mind, I’d like to describe this person. This man believes in the value of hard work and the inherent dignity of a job well done. He’s probably married and has at least three children whose picture he carries in his wallet. He loves his wife and thinks about her more than she knows. It’s true he works long hours—often he’s gone by six in the morning and doesn’t come home until after seven at night. The pressures at work are so enormous that it takes him an hour or two to unwind, so he doesn’t spend much time talking in the evening. He’s so tired that it’s all he can do to read the paper, watch a little television, and then go wearily to bed. His blood pressure is too high, he knows he needs to exercise, his diet isn’t the best, and sometimes he’s irritable and snaps at his family—and regrets it later. It’s true that he works seventy hours a week, but he doesn’t think of himself as a workaholic. He simply loves his job—and he’s good at it. And thankfully, he is able to bring home a nice paycheck and provide good things for his family. One of these days he plans to slow down and smell the coffee—but not today. He gulps his coffee and heads for the door before his family knows he’s gone. One evening he comes home and his family is not there. While he was at work, the kids grew up, his wife went back to college and found a career of her own, his children moved out, and now the house is empty. He can’t believe it. The Board of Directors just named him CEO. Now there’s no one to share the good news with. He made it to the top—alone.<sup>18</sup>

Even if you are not a successful, high-powered CEO, you can probably relate to this man. It is so easy to become consumed with work. We all tend to suffer from the hurry syndrome. We are busy people...so busy that sometimes we miss the significant people right in front of us. How many mothers and fathers have shortchanged their children for \$10,000 or \$20,000 extra a year? How many young consultants make great money but don’t have friends because they travel every week? How many wealthy people have accumulated huge nest eggs but no friends?<sup>19</sup> Do you have anyone to enjoy life with? Are you taking the time to smell the coffee? Are you truly enjoying your children? Do you have any trusted friends?

The need to have someone to enjoy life with prompts Solomon to touch on friendship and community. In 4:9-12, he lists several benefits of friendship.

- **Friends bring about good results in labor (4:9).** Solomon writes, **“Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor.”** Relationships grow out of shared work whether it is yard work, mission trips, service projects, or local church ministry. Two human souls combine their strength, creativity, talent, and ambition. There is something special about working together with at least one other person. There is a bond that takes place when people work or serve together. Who are you currently working with or serving with? *Work smarter not harder.*
- **Friends pick up one another in trouble (4:10).** Solomon writes, **“For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up.”** America is the land of the lonely. We cultivate loneliness in our culture. We take pride in being independent and alone. We even have a Declaration of Independence. Men especially are raised with this sort of macho attitude. Yet, even men need other men. This is why I meet with two weekly men’s groups. In these two groups we have learned a number of truths about community: (1) relationships are valuable, (2) we need to trust one another, (3) real men share their feelings, (4) real men need accountability, and (5) real men need to learn from one another. Who are you currently encouraging and investing in? *Work smarter not harder.*

- ***Friends warm one another in a cold world (4:11).*** Solomon writes, **“Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone?”** If you are married, does your spouse have cold feet? My wife, Lori, has polar feet. One of my most difficult acts of service is to allow her to warm her feet on me. This is sheer unconditional *agape* love on my part. Of course, you may not be the sacrificial servant that I am, so you adjust the temperature on your waterbed or electric blanket. However, in Solomon’s time, cold was a much more serious issue. When forced to sleep in the open, or even in a tent, the more bodies that huddled together, the warmer all would be. So Solomon says that two are better than one in staying warm.<sup>20</sup> Take two coals, heat them up and then separate them and what happens. Their heat will be extinguished. They cannot generate sufficient heat when they are alone. That is why it is so important for the church to meet together. We come together to create a bonfire of fellowship that we might set one another aflame with a zeal for serving the Lord. So who are you currently showing Christian love to? *Work smarter not harder.*
- ***Friends hold up one another in adversity (4:12).*** Solomon closes his thoughts in this section with these words: **“And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.”** We need other people to give us strength in the midst of persecution and hardship. “A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart” was a proverbial way of saying “there is strength in numbers.”<sup>21</sup> We all face trials and tests of our faith. If you have no one to walk through these dark times with you, life will seem utterly impossible. Again, this is why involvement in a local church is so important. Are you currently bearing someone else’s burdens? *Work smarter not harder.*

[We must choose contentment over achievement and relationships over riches. Solomon now concludes by urging us to...]

**3. Choose influence over popularity (4:13-16).** In this four verse parable, Solomon reminds us that popularity is fleeting; therefore, we are better to choose influence over popularity. The story goes like this: **“A poor yet wise lad is better than an old and foolish king who no longer knows how to receive instruction. For he has come out of prison to become king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. I have seen all the living under the sun throng to the side of the second lad who replaces him. There is no end to all the people, to all who were before them, and even the ones who will come later will not be happy with him, for this too is vanity and striving after wind”** (4:13-16). What is in view in this parable is a succession of kings, none of whom fully satisfies the populace. The point is that even though a young man may rise from the bottom of society to the top, not everyone will accept or appreciate him. Therefore, since it is impossible to achieve full acceptance it is foolish to spend one’s life seeking advancement and popularity. It is better to stay poor and wise. From this unimpressive position, it may be possible to influence more people than you ever thought possible. Influence must always trump popularity because popularity is temporal.

If we are honest with ourselves, we will acknowledge that life at the top is fleeting. Our attention span is short, our memories nonexistent, and our only question is, “What have you done for me lately?” Presidents and prime ministers may have extremely high approval ratings for a while, but they don’t last. Just ask President Bush. If the 18-0 Patriots lose today, their quarterback, Tom Brady, who is one of the greatest players in NFL history, will be a goat. Former Dallas Cowboy quarterback, Don Meredith, used to say about quarterbacks, “Today you are in the penthouse. Tomorrow you’re in the outhouse.”<sup>22</sup> What is true of quarterbacks is also true of pastors, state workers, teachers, and small business owners. Popularity doesn’t last. Today’s heroes are tomorrow bums. Become president of the Rotary Club or PTA. Get elected chairman of your Homeowners Association. You’ll be doing great if more than half the people still like you when you’re done.

Today is Super Bowl Sunday. Winning the Super Bowl is the professional dream of every NFL player. It isn't the money they make; a winner's earnings from a Super Bowl appearance amount to less than a full game's check for the average NFL player. It isn't the Vince Lombardi trophy, which they don't get to take home. It's the fame, the respect, that moment of supreme glory. The players do receive a ring, and the Super Bowl ring is perhaps the most coveted prize of the world of sports—on par with an Olympic gold medal. But even such a ring may not last. Charlie Waters of the Dallas Cowboys found that out when his *five* Super Bowl rings were stolen from the closet in his home. Joe Gilliam won two Super Bowl rings as a member of the 1974 and 1975 Pittsburgh Steelers, but he pawned them off for a few dollars after being caught in a vicious cycle of drug addiction and homelessness. Another former Steeler, Rocky Bleier, sold his four rings to cover divorce and bankruptcy proceedings. The Cowboys' Thomas Henderson had his Super Bowl XII ring seized to pay back taxes. Former Raiders All-Pro cornerback Lester Hayes sold his to pay for dental work. Mercury Morris of the Miami Dolphins sold his ring to raise money to clear his name during a drug-trafficking case.

That ring, symbolic of months and years of hard work crowned by a season at the top, is as fleeting as the glory it supposedly stands for. The hype may be spectacular, the TV ratings may be the biggest of the year, the commercial time a cost of millions...but the glory is fool's gold. Its luster is quickly tarnished. As Houston sports writer Steve Campbell puts it, "One of the dirty secrets about the Super Bowl is that the winner's high often has less of a shelf life than a container of cottage cheese."<sup>23</sup>

Achievement, riches, and popularity can all expire on us like cottage cheese. These three pursuits are so temporary. In the end they are *hebel*—breath, vapor, mist, and utter futility. So *work smarter not harder*. Just trust God, love people, and enjoy life.

Copyright © 2008 Keith R. Krell. All rights reserved. All Scripture quotations, unless indicated, are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1975, 1977, and 1995 by The Lockman Foundation, and are used by permission.

Permissions: Feel free to reproduce and distribute any articles written by Keith Krell, in part or in whole, in any format, provided that you do not alter the wording in any way or charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. It is our desire to spread this information, not protect or restrict it. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Keith Krell, Timeless Word Ministries, 2508 State Ave NE Olympia, WA 98506, 360-352-9044, [www.timelessword.com](http://www.timelessword.com)

### **Scripture References**

Ecclesiastes 4:4-16

Ecclesiastes 1:14; 2:21

Proverbs 15:16-17; 16:8

Proverbs 27:20

Genesis 41:41-43

Ephesians 2:13-22

Colossians 1:13-14

### **Study Questions**

1. How have I been guilty of rivalry and jealousy at work (4:4)? Why do I want so desperately to advance professionally and financially? What am I hoping to achieve? How has this pursuit wearied me and disappointed me? How can I discover a happy medium between workaholism and laziness (4:5-6)?
2. To what extent am I working without pleasure (4:7-8)? How can I learn to enjoy what I do? Have I placed self-imposed requirements on myself that make it difficult to find fulfillment in my work? Am I guilty of striving for more “things” at the expense of my family, friends, and church? How can I adjust my priorities to better reflect eternal goals?
3. In my work environment, am I a team player (4:9-12)? Do I cooperate with coworkers to help them in their job? Can I honestly say that I want the success of others more than I want my own success? Do I seek to have meaningful relationships with others? Who am I currently investing my time and energy in?
4. Why do I yearn for position and prestige when I recognize that it is so temporal (4:13-16)? How can I alter my mindset so that I focus on making the most of life on this earth? How can I also store up treasure for myself in eternity? Read Matthew 6:19-21 and 1 Corinthians 3:10-15.
5. What role do Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:33-34 play in helping me to balance every area of my life? How can I put God’s kingdom first in my marriage, family, work, and church?

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Donald S. Whitney, “Rest for your Souls”: <http://www.biblicalspirituality.org/weary.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Longman suggests the translation, “success or achievement.” Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 136. The use of the Hebrew term *kishron* in Eccl 5:11 supports the translation “success.” See also NIV: “achievement.”

<sup>3</sup> The phrase “vanity and striving after wind” (Eccl 4:4, 16) brackets this section.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in David Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 87. See “Professional Jealousy Grips the Nation” 2 February 2004:

<http://www.personneltoday.com/articles/2004/02/02/22184/professional-jealousy-grips-the-nation.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Solomon’s words in 4:5 seems to be the opposite of 4:4. Thus, Eaton writes, “We pass from the rat-race with its hectic scramble for status symbols to the drop-out with his total indifference.” Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament; Leicester, Eng., and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 93.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase “folding of the hands” is used in Prov 6:10; 24:33.

<sup>7</sup> Seow confirms the link to cannibalism and cites Lev 26:29; Deut 29:53; Jer 19:9; Ezek 39:28; Mic 3:3. Choon Leon Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 179.

<sup>8</sup> See Prov 6:9-11; 10:4; 12:24; 19:15; 20:13; 24:30-34. Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 137.

<sup>9</sup> Tommy Nelson, *The Problem of Life with God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 65.

<sup>10</sup> Ray Waddle, *Against The Grain: Unconventional Wisdom From Ecclesiastes* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2005), 68.

<sup>11</sup> Preaching Today citation: John Ortberg, *Leadership*, Vol. 14, no. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 138.

<sup>13</sup> Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 180.

<sup>14</sup> If Solomon has to choose between the two options of workaholism and laziness, he would choose working hard with a contented heart. Elsewhere Solomon writes, “Better is a dry morsel and quietness with it than a house full of feasting with strife” (Prov 17:1).

<sup>15</sup> Ray Pritchard, *Something New Under the Sun: Ancient Wisdom for Contemporary Living* (Chicago: Moody, 1998), 123-124.

<sup>16</sup> Sermon News: <http://www.sermonnews.com/MembersOnlyStory.asp?ID=35>.

<sup>17</sup> Revised from Nelson, *The Problem of Life with God*, 66.

<sup>18</sup> Pritchard, *Something New Under the Sun*, 125-126.

<sup>19</sup> Nelson, *The Problem of Life with God*, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth*, 97.

<sup>21</sup> Eccl 4:12 is often read at weddings with the threefold cord in marriage being understood as the bride, the groom, and Christ. However, jumping to such conclusions violates sound hermeneutical principles. The context of 4:9-12a (the value of “two” people in contrast to “one” and in climactic parallelism with “three”), correlated with similar teaching about two or three gathered together in Jesus’ name (Matt. 18:20), might legitimately suggest applying Eccl 4:12 to the importance of cooperation in the body of Christ. A careful distinction needs to be made between the primary interpretation and possible secondary applications today. William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 52-53.

<sup>22</sup> Nelson, *The Problem of Life with God*, 69.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth*, 101.