

4

Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12 *A Cord of Three Strands*

Text: Ecclesiastes 4: 11-12.

Reading: Ecclesiastes 4.

Singing:

Hymn 54: 1, 3, 5.

Psalm 16: 1

Psalm 92: 3, 4, 6.

Hymn 43: 1, 2, 3.

Hymn 30: 2, 5.

Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12

A Cord of Three Strands

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: if one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

The Preacher has been expounding on the theme that all is meaningless. Even though there is a time for everything (chapter 3), all things lead to God's judgment and the same fate awaits all. We come from the dust and to the dust we shall return.

We are already greatly blessed if we can find enjoyment in our work. We may focus on what lies before us, on what our hand finds to do and on the opportunities that God gives, but still we are subject to the futility of life.

In chapter 4, the Preacher deals with the matter of *oppression*. There is so much evil oppression and cruel exploitation under the sun. Often we have to face this sad reality on our own. In 4: 8 he writes about a man who is "all alone." This man has neither son nor brother. This man asks himself what the sense of his life is: for whom am I toiling?

Only the lonely...

So the Preacher comes to the intense matter of *loneliness* in life. In many ways and situations, we are alone. It is hard to depend on others, for they easily disappoint us. Life is already difficult; to have to go it alone makes it even more cumbersome.

I had to think also of a passage in the book of Proverbs: "Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy"(Prov 14:10). When it comes to sadness, many may seek to comfort us, but in fact we stand alone. When it comes to happiness, no one else really understands what it is that gives us so much joy. We do stand alone.

It is not without reason that Roy Orbison, famed pop/country & western singer wrote in his famous hit, “Only the lonely know the way I feel tonight...” His own life was filled with so much pain and loss, and no one really understood his deepest feelings.

In many ways, we, too, stand alone, also in our deepest trials and disappointments. Others can empathize, but they can never really understand.

Of course, it is true that the Lord is always with us. In that sense, we are never alone. But the Preacher is talking about help from fellow humans, fellow travelers. People who travel with us on the path of life, often disappoint and perhaps even desert us. This is a miserable situation. Having good company on the way, however, is still better than having to go it alone.

Two are still better than one

The Preacher therefore writes in 4:9 that two are better than one. And he works this idea out in various directions: with respect to work, marriage, and self-defence. Then follow the words of the text proper: “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

There is a climactic element in the text. He starts with one, then speaks about two, and finally comes to the number three. The last statement contains the real point he is making. The more strands a cord has, the stronger it will be. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. We will get back to that in a moment.

Loners are exceptions

Some people are “loners”. They prefer to be by themselves and on their own. Such people, however, are exceptions. Most of us would rather have company, to do things together, and to support one another in our endeavors.

The Preacher applies this first to the situation of work. Two are better than one, for they have a good return for their work. When you work together, you get so much more done. If one becomes tired, the other can pick up the slack. Also, if one falls, by accident or from fatigue, the other is immediately there to raise him up. The result is “a good return.” You simply achieve better results and make more money when you do the work together.

The Preacher also applies the same idea to the time of *sleeping*. We work during the day and –if all is well- we sleep at night. The nights, however, can be cold. In Israel there was not always a warm and cozy place to lay down. Many workers simply slept outside in the fields. The nights in Palestine, especially in the mountains, could be very cold. To break the

cold and receive warmth from each other's bodies, workers often slept close together. So they could warm one another. It is amazing how much warmth a human body can generate.

From that angle, we understand the next words. "Though one may be easily overpowered, two can better defend themselves." When you are together, you can stand back to back, helping your partner in trouble, while the enemy has to deal with more than one defender. Here, again, the situation of Ecclesiastes must be kept in mind. The workers, sleeping outside, were open and vulnerable, subject to sudden attack. But if there were a number of sleeping workers together, they would not be so easily subdued.

Let us understand that numbers are not decisive. Large armies have been overpowered by much smaller forces. There is the importance and value of strategy and surprise, but that is not the point now. The point is that two are better than one, and that together it is easier to progress in this life.

Not quickly broken

This brings us then to the cord of three strands. Do not get hung up on the strands. It does not say that a cord of three strands is unbreakable. It says that it is not *quickly* broken. I suppose that everything can break if you agitate it long enough. Every cord can be cut if the knife is sharp enough. And when the cord is cut, it is very hard, if not impossible, to put it back together again. Even if you tie the cord together again with a solid knot, this knot is always visible and you know exactly where the cord snapped. Wounds can heal, but scars remain.

The strongest cord is made up of many strands. In our text the number three is used because of the poetic significance, but also because a basic cord required three strands, each strong on its own and together even more strong.

An allegorical significance?

Some explainers see an allegorical significance in the number three. They see it as symbolizing the Holy Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Or they see a trinity expressed in this way: a man, a woman, and God. It is true in itself. If our relationships are to be complete and fully functioning, we must factor the LORD God into the picture.

A marriage is not whole without the Lord. The Lord alone can keep husband and wife together in true love and harmony. Love is something that we learn from Christ. Our Lord himself said. "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him

and make our home with him” (John 14:23). The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit live there where people love God and obey his will.

This is an important matter, but it is not the proper explanation of the text. We should not follow an allegorical explanation, unless Scripture itself indicates that an allegory is meant.

I think for a moment of Galatians 4: 24-26, where we read about Hagar and Sarai, the bondwoman and the free woman: “This contains an allegory, for these women are two covenants, one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. But the Jerusalem is free; she is our mother.” Here the Bible itself speaks of an allegory and then it is lawful to pursue an allegorical interpretation, be it also here with a good measure of caution.

Our text, however, speaks in the simplest, *literal* sense: a three-fold cord, having intertwined strands, is not quickly severed. You need a strong rope to hold things together.

A suitable helper

When the Preacher looks at the oppression, toil, and friendlessness in life and notes that all of life is bitterly fragmented, he counters that with true friendship and companionship. It is a great gift from the Lord if you have good friends who will help you when you are down and out. It is wonderful to have a partner with whom you can communicate and cooperate.

This is of even greater importance in a marriage. Is it not so that in marriage the Lord gives us “a suitable helper” (Gen 2: 20)? We are not made to go it alone. God gives us a suitable helper. True, not everyone finds a wife or husband, and some experience many blessings in being single. Marriage is certainly not a requirement in life. But every single person will admit that being alone often renders one lonely. This is true especially when you become older. To be old and alone is very difficult.

It is then a great blessing from the Lord to have a wife or husband, and failing that, to have a solid support system. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. We have been created to experience fellowship and we must fully utilize that fellowship. And the basic unit of fellowship is that of husband and wife.

When we read about a cord of three strands, we keep in mind that each strand is weak and that the effect of strength is achieved or maintained only when the three strands are tightly intertwined together.

A cord unravels

A cord does not just suddenly snap of its own volition, but it slowly unravels. The strands become loose and break one by one, and then finally, where the damage is the most evident, the cord snaps. Often there has been a constant rubbing against a sharp surface. Keep that in mind, when you assess your relationship, also as husband and wife. Are there areas where the strain is beginning to cause a strand to become stretched and weakened?

A marriage never just breaks suddenly. It goes through a process of unravelling, and when the three strands are no longer tight, each helping to hold the weight, the cord itself snaps. We can be surprised when it does snap, but if we have looked closely and paid careful attention, we would have seen it unravelling.

The text uses a word that is translated with “quickly”: “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” It takes time to *make* a relationship and it also takes time to *break* a relationship. Many do not understand that it often also takes time to *heal* a relationship.

Other translations use the word “easily”. It takes effort and perseverance to break a threefold cord. You have to work at it, and agitate it until it snaps. In both cases, the breaking of the cord is the result of persistent and unyielding effort. It is only over time and with effort that a threefold cord finally unravels and snaps.

Don't blame the Lord

Sometimes when a relationship (for example, a marriage) breaks, the blame is laid with the LORD. We suggest that He did not give a suitable helper. A husband and wife may conclude over time that they do not fit well together and actually would do better to terminate the relationship. We might not outrightly say it, but we infer that God made a mistake in bringing us together.

We should keep in mind that since the fall into sin, no relationship is perfect. Some families are dysfunctional. Many relationships are strained. That is no reason, however, to terminate the relationship or disband the family. We should never blame the LORD for our failures, but seek to obey his commandments also in broken situations. We must confess our sins, break with them, and work carefully to rebuild whatever has been destroyed or broken.

It happens that people *seemingly* confess their sins. A true confession, however, is always evidenced by deep sincerity in leading a new life. We try

to be different and do better, not just in words but also in deeds. Otherwise we fall under the judgment of the Lord expressed by James: “Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”

If we truly confess our sins in humility, face our weaknesses with resolve, and work to rebuild relationships, we may have good hope and trust that over time we will be blessed in this endeavor. We do not stand alone; we stand with Christ.

The redeeming work of Christ

In this respect, we know of the redeeming and saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Relationships can survive only when we are truly willing to forgive one another from the heart. The threefold cord will *never* be broken when Christ is in the picture, and when we let ourselves be guided by his Spirit and Word. Then we learn to overcome our disappointments, to tuck away our anger, and to walk in love as God has loved us.

The writer of Ecclesiastes does not mention all this. He had not yet progressed into the time of the New Testament. But we know today of the work of Jesus Christ and of the working of his Spirit. We know of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Upon us rests a greater obligation: “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” (I John 4: 11-12).

AMEN.