

## CHASE

### "BETTER OFF DEAD?"

#### ECCLESIASTES 4:1-3

### This Week's Core Competency

**Compassion** – I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need. Psalm 82:3-4 *Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.*

When considering literary or artistic treatments of the subject of oppression, perhaps the most well known and most deeply moving is none other than Victor Hugo's 19th century classic—*Les Miserables*. This book has sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and more recently, the award winning Broadway Musical version and Oscar winning Hollywood film version of this tale have ensconced in musical score the agony and misery of numerous forms of oppression. Set in post-Napoleonic France, *Les Miserables* tells the tragic story of Jean Valjean, imprisoned for stealing a loaf of bread. The opening notes of the musical form a dirge-like chant of beaten-down prisoners performing back-breaking labor to pay for their crimes: "Look down, look down, don't look them in the eyes . . ." This refrain weighs down the audience with the depressing reality of inescapable oppression. The song continues, "Look down, look down," with one solitary voice crying out, "Sweet Jesus, hear my prayer!" The mass chorus of prisoners sarcastically chants in despondent negation, "Look down, look down, Sweet Jesus doesn't care!" The cast of characters in Hugo's tale suffer immensely from inescapable and unbearable oppression.

Perhaps even more tragic than Jean Valjean's tale is that of the unwed mother Fantine and her daughter Cosette. Abandoned by Cosette's father,

Fantine works in a textile mill and secretly boards her child at a less-than-reputable inn. Fantine tries to hide the fact that she has a child, knowing that if she is found to be a mother without a father, she will be condemned as unfit by those around her and may lose her job as a result, thus jeopardizing her only means of supporting her daughter. Eventually she is found out and is fired from her job. With all prospects for employment extinguished, she is reduced to selling her hair, selling her teeth and tragically selling herself to support her child's needs at the inn. In the musical, as Fantine's life spirals into darkness and oppression, she sings the heart-wrenching lament, "I dreamed a dream in times gone by," a haunting ballad about hopes dashed and dreams crushed. This unforgettable and tear-inducing refrain ends with Fantine watching her life fade away. She resigns herself in song to the reality that "life has killed the dream I dreamed."

Millions of readers, theatergoers, and movie fans have resonated with Victor Hugo's tale of unfortunate woe. One would think that a compilation of such misery and dour circumstance would be a literary and theatrical flop. Yet this story has been translated into over 22 languages and inspired over 60 film adaptations, and the musical itself has played in 42 countries to a combined stage audience estimated at over 60 million people. The recent 2012 film adaptation grossed over \$440 million dollars internationally. Oppression is felt, even by those not oppressed. People identify with the tears that others shed.

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## For Discussion

You stop by a local sandwich shop for a quick lunch. While waiting for your food, you see a man walk into the restaurant with two young ladies. The guy is on his cell phone the whole time and the young women order no food and look around nervously. As your tray arrives, you observe a car pull up in the parking lot. One of the ladies gets in the car and rides off. The man with the cell phone dials another number. You have a bad feeling in your stomach as you watch what is going on. What should you do? What should you not do?

## day 1 ENCOUNTER – read God’s word to put yourself in touch with him.

### Ecclesiastes 4:1-3

1 Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:  
I saw the tears of the oppressed-  
and they have no comforter;  
power was on the side of their oppressors-  
and they have no comforter.  
2 And I declared that the dead,  
who had already died,  
are happier than the living,  
who are still alive.  
3 But better than both  
is he who has not yet been,  
who has not seen the evil  
that is done under the sun.

### Cf., verses 1-3 in another translation

4:1 So I again considered all the oppression that continually occurs on earth.  
This is what I saw:  
The oppressed were in tears, but no one was comforting them;  
no one delivers them from the power of their oppressors.  
4:2 So I considered those who are dead and gone more fortunate than those who are still alive.  
4:3 But better than both is the one who has not been born  
and has not seen the evil things that are done on earth.  
(NET)

## EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- \* Circle the first word of verse 1. Write a verse reference from Chapter 3 to which it might be referring.
- \* Draw a line connecting the words with "oppress" as its root word.
- \* Draw an arrow from "all the oppression" to the phrase that modifies it.
- \* Circle the word "saw" before "the tears" Write the word "Behold!" above it.
- \* Draw an arrow from "the oppressed" to the word associated with it.
- \* Draw an arrow from "oppressors" to the phrase that is associated with them.
- \* Draw a box around each of the two repeated phrases in verse one.
- \* Draw an arrow from these boxes to the word with which they are identified.
- \* Double underline the subject or main actor of verse 2.
- \* Draw arrows from the word "both" in verse 3 to the words identified with it in verse 2.
- \* Double underline the subject or main actor of verse 3.
- \* Put brackets around the phrase that starts and ends this passage.

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day **2**

**EXPLORE** – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. What verses in chapter 3 might Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 be a fuller discussion of?
2. "I looked and saw" - what verses in Chapter 4 have similar phrasing to this phrase found in verse 1?
3. What is the *tone* of Solomon's observations in 4:1-3? Casual and clinical or something else?
4. Why did Solomon mention the tears of the oppressed? Don't they have needs more pressing than just a tissue to wipe their eyes?
5. What distinguishes the oppressors from the oppressed in verse 1? How is this different than what is mentioned in 3:16-17?
6. Who has "no comfort" in verse one? Why is this phrase repeated?
7. Why does Solomon mention "no comfort"? Again, don't the oppressed have greater needs than sympathy?
8. What is Solomon proclaiming in verse 2?
9. Is verse 3 even possible? If impossible, why does Solomon exclaim it?
10. Solomon does not lift a finger for the oppressed in this section, nor does he admonish others to assist. Why do you think Solomon is so *passive* in 4:1-3?

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## day 3

# EXAMINE – an explanation of the message to better understand the meaning of the passage.

Solomon's favorite phrase, "meaningless" (as translated in the NIV), occurs over thirty times in Ecclesiastes. As we learned from Dr. Tom Bulick early on in this study, "The meaning of the Hebrew term *'hebel'* is key to understanding the book; unfortunately, the term has a field of meaning that cannot be adequately expressed by any one English word. It can refer to that which is insubstantial or transitory. With this sense it might be translated (1) 'vapid.' It can also refer to that which doesn't make sense or is offensive to reason. With this sense it might be translated (2) 'absurd.' Finally, it can refer to that which is useless (cf., GNT) or is a waste of time. With this sense it might be translated (3) 'meaningless'."

In our passage, Ecclesiastes 4:1-3, the word "meaningless" is curiously absent. Yet as Solomon discusses the issue of oppression, the refrain of "meaningless" begs to be inserted. "Meaningless!" plays silently behind the laments about oppression like a subliminal sound track.

Verses 1-3 of Chapter 4 begin with the odd phrase "Again, I looked and saw." This phrase introduces a new idea in the discourse and is a fitting expansion of the themes of Chapter 3, most notably themes of justice and judgment (Ecc. 3:16-17). This phrasing of "I saw" also forms a mechanism for introducing new topics of consideration (Ecc. 4:3, 7, 11, 5:13, 6:1 et al.).

Solomon observes the travesty of "Oppression" in Ecclesiastes 4:1. Three times he uses a plural word and modifies each use with a specific characteristic. Each related addition to the same Hebrew word makes translation challenging but adds to the artistic irony and mounting hyperbole used in this section. All the oppression of the tearful oppressed are oppressed by powerful oppressors. This repetition and contrast of oppressed verses oppressors heightens the despair of those who have no comforter.

The tears of the oppressed are noted. In fact, Solomon not only notices, but commands the readers to "Behold" the tears of the oppressed. Of all the things to observe concerning those overpowered by injustice, we are commanded to see the quiet, transparent, powerless tears of those suffering. To notice someone's tears requires proximity, and invites compassion. Most people hide their tears; tears are not easy to see. Tears also speak of lament and a long term disposition of sorrow. To notice tears takes time.

The oppressors have power close at hand. It is with this power that the oppressors take advantage or work violence upon the oppressed. This injustice is not found only in the courtroom (Ecc. 3:16) but is also close at hand for those in power over those less fortunate. Injustice and harm can happen anywhere from the

playground to the boardroom and not just in the courtroom.

In light of all this "oppression" talk, one would expect Solomon to highlight a chief concern or offer a potential solution for the oppressed. Instead he mentions twice that the "oppressed have no comforter." Quite literally Solomon is saying that the oppressed have no one to wail or groan with them. You would think that the saddest statement about the oppressed is that they have no deliverer or savior. Instead Solomon, in his escalating treatment of the plight of the oppressed, finds their greatest expression of vulnerability to be a lack of comforters. Tears and cries in isolation show a very human and very hopeless group. Most tragic is the oppression of the soul that cannot be remedied with income or relocation.

Solomon turns from his observations to some rather emotional and potentially irrational conclusions about the oppressed. First he declares or pronounces that the dead are better off than the living. His repetition of the state of the dead and the living classify his statement as extreme. Solomon himself is drawing the conclusion found in 4:2. He is not making a statement of fact, but rather "declaring" in his judgment that it is better to be dead and not suffer oppression than to be alive and have to suffer oppression while living. Solomon's statement in 4:2 is extreme and demonstrates the increasing hyperbolic tone of his despair.

Moving from the living and dead, Solomon introduces a "better than" statement (used elsewhere, see Ecc. 4:6, 9, 13) to state that those who have not yet been born are better off than those who are alive and must suffer. This extreme statement is made not to teach about a supposed pre-existence of souls, but to decry the status and condition of the extant oppressed. The condition of the oppressed is so poor that it would be better to never have existed. Solomon is not wishing for a return to non-existence or pre-existence (if there is such a state). He is adamantly stating that things are so bad for the oppressed there is little or no hope for them "under the sun." Out of their pain, Job, Jonah and Jeremiah make similarly absurd calls for the reversal of existence. None of these men or the readers of their writings believe that such petitions are at all possible. No one, including God, takes them seriously when they request to be "unborn" or "never born." Instead this extreme and illogical expression is seen as the height and climax of painfulness and hopelessness.

When considering Solomon's observations and exasperated conclusions about the oppressed, you have to wonder why Solomon does not offer a solution from his own resources as king or from his command as king

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to others. Some would argue that Solomon is being cold and heartless here. Others have even used this passage to question the veracity of King Solomon's authorship of the book of Ecclesiastes.

To see Solomon as cold and clinical in his observation and conclusions about the oppressed is to ignore the tenderness of 4:1 and the escalating emotion of 4:2-3. As a king, Solomon's grief about the oppressed is even more powerful when he realizes that even with his resources and power, as great as they might be, they will never be enough to remove all the oppression that people face "under the sun."

Solomon does accomplish some significant work on behalf of the oppressed in 4:1-3. First he observes the oppressed. His observation is not merely scientific or sociological. He notices tears, powerlessness and the effects of evil. To notice someone's pain and suffering is often a most significant act of advocacy. It is easy and convenient for modern day believers to ignore the pain of the oppressed. We cannot help the oppressed if we refuse to take the time to see and feel their plight.

Solomon also grieved for those under oppression. Mention of tears and a lack of comfort are expressions of empathy. Helping someone without entering into their pain is robotic and mechanical. Weeping with someone, hearing their story, and not hiding from their pain often serve as an offer of comfort, which is often a need greater than resources or rescue. We may not be able to solve all the problems of those around us, but we can do our best to reach out and offer compassion and comfort to those who are at a loss or who are oppressed.

Thirdly, even though Solomon jumps to extreme and irrational conclusions about the oppressed, these wishes for the end of life speak to Solomon's confession of his own limitations. If anyone could solve the problems of the oppressed it would be the wise and rich King Solomon. But even he, for

all his wealth and power, could not bring final freedom from all oppression in the world. The minute Solomon could liberate someone from oppression, ten more oppressors could appear. If we are to prevent oppression, we cannot work from a faulty logic that asserts that we have the power to ultimately overcome oppression. We need something more than ourselves for this problem. Solomon's extreme wishes are expressions of his humble dependence upon the only true Help and Comforter, God Himself.

Too often, followers of Christ ignore the plight of the oppressed around them. It is often easier to blame the unfortunate for their own condition. Or we may cower in fear of abuse and complication. We may run in despair at the enormity of the number of oppressed around us. "if Qohelet's gloom strikes us as excessive at this point, we may need to ask whether our more cheerful outlook springs from hope and not complacency. While we, as Christians, see further ahead than he allowed himself to look, it is no reason to spare ourselves the realities of the present." (Derek Kidner, *Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, 44). Instead we should look for those oppressed around us. We should offer compassion and empathy for their pain and loss. Maybe then we can offer some solutions or remedies.

We may not be able to rescue all the oppressed, but we can look, we can empathize, we can offer what help we can, and then trust God to do the impossible, beyond our limitations and fears. Don't let the extremes of need or the extremes of limitation keep you from being used by God to offer hope, meaning and compassion to those hurting around you. A Fantine, Cosette or Jean Valjean may be the next person you meet.

## *The Message of the Passage*

*Do not let the immense scale of injustice numb you from sharing in its pain and prevention.*

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you in his word.

- Journal your thoughts on the passage: Write about what God wants you to do . . .

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# notes STUDY – the commentaries to answer the questions.

v.1 **looked and saw** Literally "I turned and saw." A phrase or idiom indicating deeper reflection, perhaps with a connection to earlier considerations (Ecc 3:16-17). Verses 4 and 7 use a similar phrase to introduce a new observation.

v.1 **Oppression/Oppressed/Opressors** Same word used three times in verse 1. The first use is connected with a verb ("taking place" in the NIV) and the second with a noun ("tears") and the third use is connected with the word "power." These adjoining associations color each use of the basic root idea of "oppress." The word is often associated with violence, labeling those who dispense as well as those who receive it. According to James Crenshaw, this repetition is a device of rhetoric to add to the potency of the writer's concern for the oppressed. This use of repetition forms a play on words full of irony and poignancy (*Ecclesiastes*, OTL, 105).

v.1 **I saw** The Hebrew word "Hinneh" actually has an imperative or exclamatory sense - "behold, the tears of the oppressed" (ESV). The writer is not only observing, but is sharing his painful observations and is asking the reader to "behold" the plight of the poor along with him. "Hinneh' ('look!') can convey mournful resignation; in none of the passages concerning oppression does the Sage lift a finger of resistance or directly as others to do so (3:16;8:9,10)" (Daniel J. Treier, *Proverbs & Ecclesiastes*, 159) .

v. 1 **tears** Small and silent, tears observed provide dramatic description of the oppressed though literary minimalism. "The term he uses '*dim a'*, in other biblical passages (Isa.16:19;Jer. 14:17;Lam.2:18) has the sense of deep and sustained mourning" (Daniel Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 321).

v.1 **power** "Literally, 'And from the hand of their oppressors is power.' The power from their hand is not only their acts of oppression but is also the unrestrained freedom they have to do as they please. Because of this power structure, the poor are thwarted in their efforts to enjoy the benefits of life under the sun" (Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NAC, 306).

v.1 **no comforter** The idea is repeated twice for emphasis (Crenshaw, 105). The oppressed lack, while the oppressors have power at hand. The root word means to sigh or to groan. The idea communicated is that while the oppressed suffer, they often do not even have anyone to cry with them. One should hope for a deliverer or a savior, but those who are frequently oppressed often do not have even a single soul to simply share their grief. Suffering alone and unknown is perhaps the most grievous effect of oppression.

v.2 **dead** "Does not mean that death is a happy prospect to be eagerly anticipated. He does not speak positively of death in the future but of those who have already passed away. The point is that the living still have to witness the injustices of life, whereas the dead have already done that and no longer have to do so" (Choon Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 187).

v.2 **happier** The NIV here translates the word "shabach," which means "to praise" or "to commend" as a comparative "declared . . . happier." The KJV reflects more of the Hebrew meaning: "I praised the dead...more than the living." The possessor of the emotion and its declaration here is Solomon, not the dead or the living.

v.3 **never been born** Specifies never having existed, never to experience oppression or its observation. "What is intriguing is that Qohelet specifies those who have not yet been born rather than those aborted before birth, those stillborn, or those who never were and never will be born... It is better to not have lived at all than to live and witness awful oppression" (Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, NICOT, 135). The expression is not a celebration of death, but a lament at how difficult and oppressive life can be. Similar expressions can be found in Job 3:3-5 and Jeremiah 20:18.

v.3 **evil** Literally "the bad work" or "the awful results of wickedness." Those living not only see and experience evil but often endure the horrible consequences of evil from their own hands or from others. The living not only endure cancerous evils, but often must also bear the deformities, pains, amputations and scars that evil leaves in its wake.

### Family Talk

Encouragement from one parent's heart to another

**Special programming note:** Because of our two limited programming Sundays (August 11 & 18) and our Move Up series (August 25 & September 1) texts and Core Competencies may vary from adult *Scrolls*.

"But, Mom, just look at him! He is so sad and needs a home!" I should have known then that I had lost the battle. We were not going to leave the city pound that day without that dog. Eight years later, I am still tripping over that dog at night and coming home to find his hair on the forbidden couch. I think the thing that tipped the scales in my kids favor that day was the compassion I sensed in their hearts. Now, as they have grown into teenagers I have watched their compassion extend to people both in our sphere of influence and on the other side of the world. It is beautiful to watch them listen carefully and prayerfully and be motivated to act on the behalf of hurting people. How do we teach compassion to our kids? We must first of all practice compassion ourselves. We need to ask ourselves if we are willing to get involved and do something to help others in need. Next, we need to create opportunities for our kids to show compassion. Take them with you to deliver a meal to a sick friend. Volunteer at a local compassion agency. Look into supporting a child in another country. This can be a little overwhelming for a busy family but the value of teaching your children compassion will be worth the effort. Now, if I could only do something about that dog . . .

#### What Does The Bible Say

Weekly Verse:

Look up the word "oppression" in the dictionary. What does it mean?

2. How do the oppressed feel?

3. Read Zechariah 7:8-10. What does the Lord say?

#### What Do You Think

List some ways we can show compassion to others.

#### What R U Going To Do

Sometimes it seems the only news we hear is bad news. Have your parents help you find some good news of people showing compassion to others and then put on your own newscast - Welcome to the Compassion Channel - where good news rules!

### MEMORY TIME

Core Comp

Compassion - I believe God wants me to help others in need.

Memory Verse

### KIDPIX COUPON

I memorized CC \_\_\_\_ and Verse \_\_\_\_\_. Family completed **Say** \_\_\_\_\_ **Think** \_\_\_\_\_ **Do** \_\_\_\_\_

Child's name \_\_\_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_\_ Parent's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Earn tokens by completing the Bible study portion of this page.  
Questions: Kids@pantego.org

# 30 CORE COMPETENCIES

## 10 CORE BELIEFS

### **Trinity** *2 Corinthians 13:14*

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

### **Salvation By Grace** *Ephesians 2:8-9*

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

### **Authority of the Bible** *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

### **Personal God** *Psalms 121:1-2*

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

### **Identity in Christ** *John 1:12*

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

### **Church** *Ephesians 4:15-16*

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

### **Humanity** *John 3:16*

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

### **Compassion** *Psalms 82:3-4*

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

### **Eternity** *John 14:1-4*

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

### **Stewardship** *1 Timothy 6:17-19*

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

## 10 CORE PRACTICES

### **Worship** *Psalms 95:1-7*

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

### **Prayer** *Psalms 66:16-20*

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

### **Bible Study** *Hebrews 4:12*

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

### **Single-mindedness** *Matthew 6:33*

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

### **Spiritual Gifts** *Romans 12:4-6*

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

### **Biblical Community** *Acts 2:44-47*

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

### **Giving Away My Time** *Colossians 3:17*

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

### **Giving Away My Money**

*2 Corinthians 8:7*

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

### **Giving Away My Faith** *Ephesians*

*6:19-20*

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

### **Giving Away My Life** *Romans 12:1*

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

## 10 CORE VIRTUES

### **Joy** *John 15:11*

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

### **Peace** *Philippians 4:6-7*

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

### **Faithfulness** *Proverbs 3:3-4*

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

### **Self-Control** *Titus 2:11-13*

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

### **Humility** *Philippians 2:3, 4*

I choose to esteem others above myself.

### **Love** *1 John 4:10-12*

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

### **Patience** *Proverbs 14:29*

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

### **Kindness/Goodness** *1 Thess. 5:15*

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

### **Gentleness** *Philippians 4:5*

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

### **Hope** *Hebrews 6:19-20*

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

## About the Authors

**Tom Bulick** (M.A. in Educational Leadership, Eastern Michigan University, Th.M. in Old Testament, and Ph.D. in Bible Exposition, Dallas Theological Seminary). For more than forty years, Tom has served as pastor, faculty member, and administrator. Tom was Vice President for Student Life and Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Trinity Western University (Vancouver, B.C.) for twelve years before accepting the position of Spiritual Formation Pastor at Pantego Bible Church. He and his wife Ruth have been married forty-five years and have one son, Zach.

**Wendy Hollabaugh** (B.S.W. University of Texas at Arlington) is the Children's Minister at Pantego Bible Church. Wendy has over ten years of experience in Children's Ministry. She has a passion for leading families to connect with God and each other. She enjoys creating compelling environments where kids fall in love with God and His Truth. Wendy and her husband, Greg, are also involved in their own personal youth ministry as they are training their three teenagers, Hannah, Aaron and Noah.

**Eric Wright** (Th.M. Dallas Theological Seminary) guest author.



8001 Anderson Blvd.  
Ft. Worth, TX 76120  
1-866-PANTEGO  
Fax 817-275-6403  
www.pantego.org

The mission of THE SCROLLS is to help you develop the beliefs, practices, and virtues of a follower of Jesus Christ called The 30 Core Competencies through your own active reading of the Bible. Send any questions or comments you may have about this lesson to Tom Bulick. His e-mail address is [tbulick@pantego.org](mailto:tbulick@pantego.org).