

PURPOSE

OF COMMUNITY

DATE

July 18-19

WEEK

7 of 10

OVERVIEW

Ecclesiastes 4

KEY VERSE

Ecclesiastes 4:9

SETTING THE STAGE

Ecclesiastes is a unique book in that there is not an easily defined setting, chronological timeline or countryside context. Yet, it is a book that transcends settings, timelines, and countrysides. Ecclesiastes is pure philosophy written as a confessional autobiography. ¹ In this book, we get to see the questions that Solomon was pondering, the lessons that he was learning and the perspective of looking back over a life that was not always based on God's principles. In reading it, we can learn from his mistakes. Solomon was a king but was also considered a teacher and a preacher because of the wisdom and understanding bestowed on him by God. When reading Ecclesiastes, picture a speaker gathering a group of people together to listen to words of wisdom.

The name of the book is based on the Greek translation of a Hebrew word, 'Qohelet.' The Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (i.e. Old Testament) gave this book the name 'Ekklesiastes' transliterated into English as Ecclesiastes. ² The root of that Greek word is 'Ekklesia' which means "assembly." In essence, the writings of this book are based on community, an assembly of people.

If you want to dig a bit deeper into the title itself, the Hebrew word 'Qohelet' is translated in the NASB as "preacher" and the NIV as "teacher," both being good translations.

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LESSON OUTLINE

1. God in Community
2. Purpose in Community
3. Three in Community

THINGS TO KNOW

- Community is not just what we do; it is who we are.
- God exists in community with Himself as the Trinity.
- Ecclesiastes helps the reader develop a God-centered worldview and recognize the dangers of a self-centered worldview. ³

PURPOSE

OF COMMUNITY

Setting the Stage, continued >

And where do preachers and teachers do their preaching and teaching? Traditionally in a church community; an assembly of people. Solomon, in his wisdom, realized that these words which are recorded in this book are best embraced in the context of community.

Introduction

One could argue that there has never been a time where our culture has been more obsessed with self-discovery and finding our true selves than right now. Websites such as Ancestry.com and 23AndMe.com have surged in popularity, making DNA testing more accessible and available than ever before. People want to know their heritage, their background, and their cultural makeup. They want to know who they really are.

And as popular as discovering one's history has become, it seems as if there is even more excitement over discovering one's personality type. Personality tests such as the Enneagram, Myer's Briggs, and Strengths Finders have soared in recent popularity. People want to know their strengths, their uniqueness, and how best to connect with others.

Community is not just what we do; it is simply who we are.

Whether it is ancestry (what has **made** you, you) or whether it is personality (what **makes** you, you), people are on a chase to discover who they really are. This should not be surprising, as the Bible speaks to the concept of identity thoroughly and frequently throughout Scripture. However, how this conversation starts might be different than we might otherwise assume.

Our culture begins the exploration of self-discovery by starting with ourselves, which seems natural. But the Bible begins the exploration of self-discovery by starting not with our self, but with God. And in seeing a clearer picture of God, we will begin to see who God made us to be. As we will see today, we are deeply relational, communal people. Community is not just what we do; it is simply who we are.

1. GOD IN COMMUNITY

The stated purpose for people to be engaged in community with one another is not just about a special 'spiritual' pandering to those who are naturally 'social butterflies' or those who are exuberant extroverts. Nor, does the purpose of life in community imply a personal experience of

¹ Dr. Ed Young, *Been There. Done That. Now What?* Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville TN; 1994, p. 1

² www.soniclight.com/ecclesiastes

³ John E. Johnson, "The Special Relevance of Ecclesiastes for Contemporary Culture," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169:674 (April-June 2012): p.159-71.



being energized by people around you. If so, then the extroverts would be more spiritually ‘ahead’ than the introverts. Myers-Briggs test, anyone?

ENTJ? What a great Christian!

INFP? Better luck next time!

If this were the case, it would only contribute to boosting pride or deepening despair, based on wherever you fell on the personality spectrum. If this were what Christian community meant all along, we would be in some kind of trouble no matter our personality type.

The purpose for community is not God’s competition for us to compete in, it is His accommodation for us to experience more of Him and the life we were meant to live. This does not mean that your ‘ideal’ community ought to be large or small or deep or wide or every day or every-other-day or even once a week.

There is no hard and fast biblical formula or equation, except that we must gather as a church ‘frequently’ and live in such a way that we are sharing life with each other. The book of Hebrews exhorts us of the importance:

HEBREWS 10:24-25 *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (ESV)*

The word for “church” that we see in the New Testament’s original Greek language is the term ‘Ekklesia,’ which means “an assembly.” In other words, what makes the church truly the church, is not the programming, music, or activities. It is the gathering of the body of Christ, which has covenanted itself to one another — meeting together frequently.

Why is meeting together important, commanded, and exhorted?

There are many reasons why meeting together as a church and maintaining a level of biblical community can be good for your soul. But perhaps the greatest of all reasons is that God models this, and we are made in His image.

Maybe you are thinking, “Wait, God models going to church? How does that make sense?” Not quite, although He does meet with us in church gatherings. Community is not an explanation of what God does as much as it is a revelation of **who God is**.

The Bible explains to us that God exists in community, and He has done so for eternity, even before time, space, and matter began, in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is a breathtaking view of God — that God is one in three, three in one. We will not be looking into how or why this is possible, but rather, that it is revealed to us—and it alone is the foundational truth for why community is important for us.

In other words, if God exists in community Himself, and if we are designed in His image, this means that God wired the need for community deep into the hard drive and operating systems of our souls.

When we neglect community, we become less of what God designed us to be, we become less... human. To be human — to be made in the image of a triune God — means fundamentally to be communal. If God exists in community (as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and if Jesus Himself felt the need to surround Himself with the larger community of twelve disciples and a smaller core group of three (Peter, James, and John), we would be foolish to think that fullness of life can happen without the Christian community.

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2. PURPOSE IN COMMUNITY

Since everything started with the existence of a triune God who existed eternally and fully in community from eternity past, and if this communal God created humankind in His image and all of life, this means the purpose of community is woven inextricably throughout the very purpose of life. To really live, and to really experience the life God designed us to have, we should prioritize weaving our lives into the lives of others, reflecting the perfect, good, and communal nature of God Himself.

To be sure, the Bible does not command your community to be large or small. It simply exhorts you towards community because there are certain advantages to having it. Read the passage again and see if you can see the three key ideas about community:

ECCLESIASTES 4:9-12 *Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor. ¹⁰For 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. ¹¹Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone? ¹²And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.*

We can clearly see that there are advantages to living in community. The three key ideas are 1) If you fall, your community can pull you up; 2) If you are cold, your community can warm you up; and 3) If you are weak, your community can strengthen you. Let's dig a little deeper.

A. When you fall, community can pull you up.

King Solomon wrote in the book of Proverbs, “*for the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity*” (Proverbs 24:16, ESV). In biblical times, the number seven represented the number of completion. So, Solomon is saying that the righteous person falls completely...routinely...frequently...but, righteousness is not proven by not falling, but in the response after falling: **rising again**.

Significantly, Solomon pairs that truth in Proverbs 24 with this principle in Ecclesiastes 4. How can a righteous person get up and rise again after falling? By living in a community where they can be reached in the pit and lifted back up on their feet.

Generally speaking, living life in community serves as a necessary safeguard from being rattled by the brokenness of your circumstances or your own sin. The Bible does not promise that living in community means that you will not stumble or fall into a pit at times; in fact, it almost implies the opposite, that you will. But, living in community will provide a context where the strong and compassionate hands of others around you can pull you up when you are either too weak to get up yourself or your circumstances are too steep for you to get out on your own.

B. When you are spiritually cold, community can warm you up.

Look at verse 11, “*Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone?*” This biblical principle exhorts us to stay close to one another.

When we face the coldness of life through pain, grief, hardship, or lack—one of the greatest temptations is to isolate because we do not want to be a burden to other people. Throughout the Bible, we are warned to not grow callous or cold at heart for the things of the Lord.

And Scripture is clear that it is easy for us to become cold and callous towards the person of God, the Word of God, and the mission of God—if the people of God are not involved. Hebrews 3:13

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mentions, “*But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin*” (ESV). The key elements involved are the people of God and the Word of God—together and acting at the same time. This verse just cannot happen without those two parties involved.

The author creates a key analogy for us: “What happens when a heart becomes hardened?” It usually happens when there is no blood running through it. Without the presence and flow of blood, the heart will become cold, hard, and lifeless. But with the presence and flow of blood, the heart will be warm, soft, and life-giving. The author essentially communicates that biblical community is necessary for spiritual thriving. Biblical community is a give-and-take of administering and ministering the life-giving Word of God to each other’s heart. When our hearts feel cold spiritually, it is usually a byproduct of either the people of God or the Word of God missing in our life or both.

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C. When you are weak, community can strengthen you.

Lastly, we see a third truth about the purpose of community, that in your weakness, community will make you strong. The author writes, “*And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him*” (v. 12a).

Notice that the author does not say, “When are you weak” or “If you are weak.” Rather, he implies quite clearly, “It is certain you are weak. You **might** prevail against temptation or weakness or struggle; but in community, you **will** prevail.”

Our natural pride shrouds us from our own weakness and deludes us with overconfidence in our own abilities. Simply put, this is the nature and outworking of sin in our own lives: underestimating our weaknesses and overestimating our strengths. And the solution is quite surprising. The author does not say here, “Memorize more Scripture!” Although that is important. He does not say, “Pray more!” or “Get more sleep!” or “Self-care!” or “Listen to more sermons!” Although all those things are beneficial. He essentially is saying, “Live in community! Get an accountability group!”

Why? Perhaps it is because others will truly see you, will truly know you, and therefore, can finally help you. When we live in community, the darkness and secretiveness of sin loses its hold over us, slowly and surely. When we live in community, it brings things that are hidden out into the light, and it cleans us up. A while back, I heard that in biological organisms, whether in plants or animals, “Mutations grow in isolation.” So, it is with our spiritual lives as well.

The purpose of community can breathe life into our lives in so many different ways. As the passage infers, it can pull us up out of our pits and fallings; it can warm us up with the reviving Word of God when we are cold to the things of God, and it strengthens us against lures of the world and temptations toward sin. I heard a seminary professor say that in God’s divine humility, He created us for something other than just Himself: the community of others.

3. THREE IN COMMUNITY

There is one last phrase in the text that should strike you as rather peculiar. If you notice, throughout the passage, there are always two parties at work: you and another person. Yet, at the very end of verse 12, the passage notes, “*A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart*” (NASB) “*a threefold cord is not quickly broken.*” (ESV)

Did he mean to say, “A twofold cord is not quickly broken” instead? Perhaps it is because the

author recognizes that in biblical community, there are never only two parties involved, but three—**because God is also present.**

Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, “*For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them*” (Matthew 18:20, ESV). In a context of biblical community, there are always three parties involved: you, your community, and God.

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If it is your spouse and you, your cord is not quickly broken with God in the middle. If it is your accountability partner and you, your cord is not quickly broken with God in the middle. If it is your church community, Bible study class, small group and you—your cord is not quickly broken with God in the middle.

In a biblical community, there are always three parties at work. The Apostle Paul gives us a picture of how this works in 1 Corinthians 12 when he analogizes the body of Christ to a human body and explains how it should operate based on how God designed the body to operate. Paul writes that God has given individuals in His church certain giftings and abilities so that they can work with one another, minister to one another, and be nourished by one another.

Think about the analogy that Paul gives us and let us try to apply these truths in real life.

For example, let us say the ear felt an irritating itch. And you are the ‘ear.’ How do you think God is going to answer your need for being ‘scratched’ so to speak? Do you think God will just answer it with a neurological-lightning bolt from heaven, and ‘POOF,’ the itch is gone?

Probably not, especially if we think about the dilemma of ‘scratching’ through the gridwork of Paul’s analogy about the church being like a human body. For instance, if all members of the church community function like a body—and if an ear had an itch—what would happen is that the brain would receive signals of ‘ITCH ON THE EAR’, and then the brain would send signals to the hand of ‘SCRATCH THE EAR.’ And then the hand would move upwards toward the face and then scratch the ear. Problem solved, the itch has been removed and the irritation has been relieved. The ear says, “Thank you, brain and hand!” And the brain and hand give each other a high-five (with the other hand of course), and say, “You are welcome ear!”

And so, it is with God’s church as well. God designed us such that we each need one another, and He has equipped each of us with the unique ability to serve and to be served by one another.

Truly, a threefold cord is not easily broken. It is modeled in our salvation and also in our sanctifying community.

This keeps us humble, but confident—a necessary tension that breathes life and flourishing into our being. This tension keeps us 1) **humble**, because we know that self-sufficiency and pride are not our friends, for they only isolate us and blind us. And this tension keeps us 2) **confident**, because we know that there are solutions and modes for help in the context of God’s church that can meet us in our every need, and they truly are our friends.

So, what does this mean for us, practically? It means that if we cut ourselves off from the community of the church, we are fundamentally cutting ourselves off from the main means through which God is trying to minister **to us** through others. And it also means the reverse. If we cut ourselves off from the community of the church, we are also cutting ourselves off from the main means through which God is trying to minister **through us** to others.

In other words, whenever we think we are reducing our threefold cord down to two strands, we actually reduce our threefold cord down to one strand. Because when we remove one strand from the equation (such as God or community), we actually lose both strands in the process. God ministers to us through community.

Biblical community, therefore, always happens in three. Even in the Gospel, you see all three persons of the Godhead working together, ministering together, and accomplishing together. The Father planned our salvation, the Son accomplished our salvation, and the Spirit applies salvation to us. And now, we have access to the Father because of the Son and through the Spirit.

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HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

This has been a year when we have had to deal with social distancing and even isolation. It has proven that we need one another in ways we have perhaps taken for granted. God has designed us for community. From the time of Adam and Eve until now, God has wanted us to be part of community.

Community is not our idea, it is God's idea. Not simply as His explanation for how we ought to live, but rather, as His revelation of who He is. If we fail to model our lives after this inherently relational Creator, we will fail to live up to our own design, having been made in His image, as inherently relational people.

Christian community is simply sharing a common life in Christ. It moves us beyond the self-interested isolation of private lives and beyond the superficial social contacts that pass for "Christian fellowship." The biblical ideal of community challenges us instead to commit ourselves to life together as the people of God.⁴

Let us pray for the humility to get connected to the body of Christ—not just for our own sake, but for the sake of others as well. Why? So that we can be a blessing to them, and so that they can be a blessing to us. It is truly His plan and our purpose to live in community.

⁴ www.bible.org/article/community-god's-design-growth; by Howard Macy.