

# ABUNDANCE & DEPENDENCE

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## *Ecclesiastes 4:1-5:7*

Have you ever given much thought to how utterly strange it is to do your shopping at a supermarket. I basically go to the shops every day, so I get frequent opportunities for reflection. You walk in to see shelves piled high with fruit and vegetables. And you don't have to give any thought at all to the farmers who laboured to plant and grow and harvest and package your food. You have no idea about the chickens that laid your eggs, or the cows that produced your milk, or the pigs that became your bacon. You can choose from 54 different types of toothpaste and 15 different forms of toilet paper. And if something is out of stock, that comes as a great shock; not only a surprise or an inconvenience, but a suspension of reality itself. And with the self-serve checkouts you don't even need to pause your podcast to speak to another person the whole time. You can fill your trolley and finish your whole shop without relying on anyone else.

A trip to a 21st century supermarket is an experience of abundance without dependence, and it captures what I think is an unspoken ambition for our whole lives. You see it in small ways every day: Google maps give you directions so you don't need to stop and ask for directions. Uber Eats gets you your favourite food and you don't even need to leave the house. The more you look the more you see this promise of abundance without dependence *everywhere*. Social media promises friendship and connection without physical presence. Pornography promises intimacy without faithfulness and commitment. New cryptocurrencies promise wealth without hard work. The good old property market promises future security so you won't need to depend on landlords or family or friends again. Modern technology, and education, and workplaces, and advertising, all promise us the same thing: abundance without dependence.

Which, it turns out, is actually a very old ambition. This is what Adam and Eve were seeking when they grasped the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: wisdom without listening to God, pleasure without trusting in God, abundance without depending on God.

Here's how C.S Lewis puts it in *Mere Christianity*:

*What Satan put into the heads of our remote ancestors was the idea that they could "be like gods" – [that they] could set up on their own as if they had created themselves – [that they could] be their own masters – [that they could] invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside God, apart from God.*

*And out of that hopeless attempt has come nearly all that we call human history – money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery – the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy.*

The book of Ecclesiastes shines the light on this very ancient human ambition to find abundance without dependence.

And it shows it to be exactly that: a hopeless attempt; a fruitless quest. In our chapters today we will see 4 ways that the story of abundance without dependence is indeed a long and terrible story.

And we will also see how the Teacher invites us to live a different story. To find abundance in dependence on others, and most of all in God himself.

Ecclesiastes wants to liberate us from futility and frustration into a full life that is truly fruitful. May God do that work in us through his Word today.

## 1. A Human Ambition: Abundance Without Dependence

So let's work through this passage and see first of all and hear the teacher's verdict on our quest for abundance without dependence.

### - *Competition and Oppression*

Now, the first thing to say is that when we are all on this quest for independent abundance, then society becomes a place of competition. Hear what the teacher observes in verse 4:

*And I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*

Motivated by envy, we work hard to compete and achieve. And so we literally say that a job opportunity is very competitive, or the competition to buy a house in Sydney is insane. You can measure your *performance* on social media. In fact you can measure your performance basically everywhere as we all strive to forge our independent meaning and identity and values and all the rest.

Which is just exhausting. But it is also dangerous. Because when our fellow humans become our competitors, they can then very quickly become threats. And we can justify their oppression in order to secure our abundance. You see it in bullying that happens in the playground or workplace. To secure your popularity or a promotion, you may need to put others down, or push them out of the way. You can see it in the treatment of outsiders or strangers, who are labeled as a threat to our jobs or a danger to society. You can see it in global politics, where nation competes against nation for land, or power, or influence. And so the world becomes a hostile and inhospitable place for humans to live.

The teacher says:

*"I saw the tears of the oppressed  
– and they have no comforter;  
power was on the side of the oppressors  
– and they have no comforter.*

In little ways and large, the search for abundance without dependence leads to exhausting competition and all manner of oppression. This too is meaningless, like chasing after the wind.

### - *Accumulation and Loneliness*

Verses 7 and 8 give us another picture of what happens when we pursue abundance without dependence. Let's listen once more to the teacher:

*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?"*

Here is a man who has given his life to accumulation. Perhaps he spent late nights studying to get the best marks he could. He worked longer hours than anyone to get that first promotion. Maybe he moved overseas for a while to expand his CV, broaden his experience. Then one night he's just after he has just wrapped up a big project, he's sitting in his dream house, sipping on an expensive glass of wine. And he can't help but notice he's all alone. He thinks about the brother he hasn't spoken to for a year or so. He wonders what his adult son is up to at university college, but thinks it would be weird to give him a call.

He remembers a pang of regret the toll that his work took on his family. But he pushes it aside, opens his emails, and presses on with his toil. For there are other deals to be done, more money to be made, more things to buy; there's more *wind* to chase.

We don't have to stretch our imaginations very far to grasp what the teacher is saying. You can accumulate abundance, and gain your independence. But there's a fine line between independence and loneliness, and the statistics would suggest that we live in a society that is more independent, *and more lonely*, than ever.

*This too is meaningless, – a miserable business.*

#### - *Power and Politics*

From verse 13, the teacher then turns our attention to politics. For maybe abundance without dependence could be ours if we just advanced our own position, or if we only had the right person in power. But just a cursory glance at history should relieve us of that delusion. Listen again from verse 13:

*Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning. The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. There was no end to all the people who were before them.*

I wonder if the teacher has Joseph in mind. A youth who was released from prison and made prime-minister over all of Egypt. Or maybe he is thinking of David: the poor shepherd anointed as King over Israel. Surely the future of God's people was secure! They had friends in high places; a faithful King on the throne. All the people were before them!

*But [says the teacher] those who came later were not pleased with the successor.*

Joseph was forgotten. And the Israelites were enslaved. David was betrayed. And his Kingdom was divided. Powers rise and fall. Rulers are praised and then despised. Political trends come and go.

In this election season we would do well to remember that the shifting sand of politics is no place to build our hope. I have been able to vote for 14 years and in that time there have been **7** prime-ministers. It took at least a few generations for Joseph to be forgotten, and a good couple of decades for David to be forsaken. But we get a reminder pretty much every two years that politics cannot give us abundance without dependence. By all means exercise your right to vote with godly wisdom. But part of that wisdom will be to know that when it comes to power and politics:

*This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*

### *- Many Words and the Sacrifice of Fools*

So far we've seen that competition leads to oppression. Accumulation leads to loneliness. That power-plays and politicking is futile and frustrating. So where else can we turn?

Perhaps we could go to the house of God? That is surely the right answer. But before we get there, the teacher says "be careful!" He warns us that it is possible to approach God in the wrong way.

Ch 5, v. 1:

*Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.*

*Do not be quick with your mouth,  
do not be hasty in your heart  
to utter anything before God.*

*God is in heaven  
and you are on earth,  
so let your words be few.*

*A dream comes when there are many cares,  
and many words mark the speech of a fool.*

He goes on to warn against making rash vows and empty promises. Verse 7 says: "Much dreaming and many words are meaningless."

In all of this, the teacher is warning us that it is possible to bring our dreams of abundance without dependence into our worship of the Lord. That we can actually try get abundance *from God*, without actually depending *on God*. We can treat coming to God's house like coming to the bargaining table. If we can just offer up the right words, and make the right vows; if we can pray the right prayers, sing the right songs, then surely God will give us what we need. But when we treat our worship of the Lord in this way, the teacher says we are fools, offering fools' sacrifices.

Why? Because God is in heaven and we're on earth! He's the creator we are mere creatures! We were not made to bargain with him, but depend on him! We don't need God to make our dreams come true, we need him to bring us back to reality, to teach us what really matters. God doesn't need our vows and promises, we need his word and his promises. It's not about what we offer him, but what he offers us.

## 2. A Divine Invitation: Abundance In Dependence

And here in this passage we hear that God is offering us an invitation to live as he created us to live. To find abundance *in dependence* on God, and on the people around us.

### - *Contentment*

So how do we respond to the exhausting demands of endless competition? Many of us feel that we have two choices: drop out or devote ourselves more fully to the quest. We feel like we either need to accept the challenge, or resign ourselves to defeat. We've seen that accepting the challenge is an exercise in futility.

But we're also warned against the path of just giving up: the teacher says in verse 5 that it is the fool who folds their hands and ruins themselves. We might be tempted to retreat from competition into safe and controllable virtual worlds. We can run to all manner of distraction and diversion to cope with the pressures of life. But to that temptation the teacher echoes the wisdom of Proverbs chapter 6:

*6 Go to the ant, you sluggard;*

*consider its ways and be wise!*

*7 It has no commander,*

*no overseer or ruler,*

*8 yet it stores its provisions in summer*

*and gathers its food at harvest.*

*9 How long will you lie there, you sluggard?*

*When will you get up from your sleep?*

*10 A little sleep, a little slumber,*

*a little folding of the hands to rest—*

*11 and poverty will come on you like a thief*

*and scarcity like an armed man.*

So on the one hand, you have the empty-handed fool. And on the other hand there is the fool who has two full hands, but an empty life. But the teacher invites us to a third way: contentment.

Look again from verse 5:

*Fools fold their hands  
and ruin themselves.*

**Better one handful with tranquillity**  
*than two handfuls with toil  
and chasing after the wind.*

I think G.K. Chesterton nails it when he says:

*There are two ways to get enough. One is to continue to  
accumulate more and more. The other is to desire less.*

Or you could say to desire *differently*. Instead of total independence, the wise person knows that true abundance is found in networks of healthy dependence. We were not made to live relying entirely on ourselves, but to exist in communities where other people can rely on us, and we can rely on others.

The empty-handed fool has nothing to offer anyone. The full-handed fool has everything they need and more, but no-one to share it with, and with their hands full of stuff, they literally can't lend anyone a hand. But with one hand spare, the wise person has the freedom to give and receive, to offer help and ask for it, to work faithfully and rest joyfully. The wise person doesn't buy into life as a competition. Instead they buy into community; they embrace their limits and depend upon others; they know when to stop chasing wind and to enjoy what they've been given.

### - *Companionship*

This wisdom of contentment in community is picked up in verse 9 as the teacher turns his attention to the blessing of companionship. The abundance without dependence story makes us all competitors. But here God invites us to see the people around us as fellow pilgrims, as companions to help us and strengthen us and support us. Listen again:

*Two are better than one,  
because they have a good return for their labor:  
If either of them falls down,  
one can help the other up.  
But pity anyone who falls  
and has no one to help them up.  
Also, if two lie down 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.*

It is a great shame that we hear this passage and think immediately of weddings. Let's be honest, put your hands up if you straight away thought of marriage? It's so easy to sentimentalise these verses as if it's just about being able to snuggle up to someone on the couch on a cold winter night. But we should be getting the idea that the teacher is too much of a realist for such soppy sentimentalism.

The picture is of two friends labouring together, helping each other in their hard work. Of two companions on a long journey, spurring each other on to keep going, lifting them up when they fall down. Two soldiers at war who keep each other warm through the night and have each others backs through the day.

The key is the final line: *a chord of three strands is not quickly broken*. Life is hard and the world is harsh, and so this passage is an ode to the indispensable gift of friendship.

In a world of competition, it is no surprise that many people in our society – particularly men – say that they hardly have any close friends. Here God invites us to see that we will know a far greater abundance if we gave less energy to accumulating stuff and more energy to cultivating these sorts of companions.

- *Quiet*

Again, the teacher is driving home to us that we were made to be dependant. On others, and most importantly, on the Lord himself.

And so he says: “guard your steps when you go near to the house of God. Go near to *listen...*” We come to the house of God, in dependence upon the Lord.

Instead of coming to pile up our own words, we come to quietly listen to God’s word. Instead of bringing our own dreams into worship, we come and let God’s word shape our reality. Instead of making our vows and promises we come to receive the gracious promises of God.

Which is why the two central practices of the church throughout history have remained the same. There are different emphases at different times and in different traditions, but Christian worship has always centred on the preaching of the Word, and the sharing of the Lord’s supper. In one we come with open ears ready to listen. In the other we come with open and empty hands ready to receive.

Both of these practices heed the conclusion of the teacher: *Therefore, fear the Lord*. That is, we gather in the awareness of God's presence in our midst. As creatures, we come in humble dependence on our Creator. We know we've got nothing to offer, and so we let God make the first move, we receive all that he offers and *then* respond with gratitude and faith.

We allow him to fill us, then we overflow with song and offer up our prayers. We come to him to be fed, and then we can freely give ourselves in fellowship and service. Worship is not about our self-expression. Rather it's removing ourselves from the centre, and placing God back on the throne where he belongs. *For God is in heaven, and you are on earth, so let your words be few.*

- *Christ*

To finish. There are a couple of verses which we haven't touched on at all, and they are perhaps the most confronting in the whole passage.

When reflecting on all the oppression he sees in the world, the teacher says in verses 2 and 3:

*And I declared that the dead,  
who had already died,  
are happier than the living,  
who are still alive.  
But better than both  
is the one who has never been born,  
who has not seen the evil  
that is done under the sun.*

Finding contentment and companionship can ease our passage through this world. But here the teacher wonders whether any of us, if we had a say in it, would *choose* to be born into a world of oppression and competition and loneliness and politics. Of course, none of us do get a say in it. And so these confronting verses are simply an honest recognition that life in this world is really hard.

But there is someone who *did* have a say in it. Jesus is the only person who ever got to choose if he was born. He saw all the evil that is done under the sun, and yet he chose to be born into this world. In Christ, the God who is in heaven, became one of us on the earth.

He entered into this world of oppression, indeed he became a powerless victim of oppression. And still he came.

He came into this world of loneliness and isolation. Indeed he was abandoned by all his closest companions and left all alone. And still he came.

He came into this world of politics and power-plays. Indeed, he was put to death, because others were clinging on their power. And still he came.

And in Christ's coming he shows us another way to live in this world. We see in Jesus a perfect model of contentment. He was not ashamed to rely on his close friends and companions. He withdrew to quiet places in order to be filled up by his Father.

And he also reveals to us the folly of our way. The true picture of the abundance without dependence story is not stocked supermarket shelves, or our shiny screens, or our investment portfolios.

No, the abundance without dependence story ends in a bloody cross, where we killed God because we wanted to do it our way, by ourselves, thanks very much.

And yet the cross is also the picture of God's invitation to depend on him. There we see his arms out-stretched to the world in love. There we see that God is not a lonely accumulator but a lavish giver; a fountain of grace and mercy; forgiveness poured out for all our foolish delusions and sinful ambitions.

And so Ecclesiastes bids us to come to Christ.

Seek contentment in him: for to know Christ is to have everything we need.

Find companionship with him: for Jesus is the true friend who laid down his life for us in love.

Listen to his words. For he is the Eternal Word of God

As we learn to depend on him, in him we will find abundance.

To a weary world, Christ himself offers *the* divine invitation:

*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

**Matthew 11:28-30**