

Ecclesiastes

Lecture 7

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Next, Solomon will look at a number of things under the sun which seem to challenge the reality of God's sovereignty. Beginning at chapter 3, verse 16 and through to the end of chapter 4... We will look at six headings or six problems. Injustice, death, oppression, envy, isolation, and fleeting popularity. I know everybody's excited now.

First, injustice. Verse 16: Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. He's moved from times to places. And the place of righteousness and justice here refers to the law courts. That is the place for the redress of grievances. That is where you EXPECT to find justice, but behold, that is not what Solomon finds. As corrupt as the other branches of our government may be, there is little doubt in my mind that the courts are worse. And the phenomenon is not new. Three thousand years ago Solomon saw corrupt and wicked courts. And this is a threat to a view which sees God as the sovereign orderer of the times.

So, Solomon, appeals by faith, not by what he sees, but by faith, to the final reckoning. In v.17: He says in his heart, he doesn't see, but he speaks by faith: God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. Here is a new time, not mentioned in the list we looked at last week. And without this time, this resolution, this end, history is meaningless. In fact, without His coming in glory to judge the living and the dead, injustice itself would be a cruel illusion. It looks like evil, but it's really just some chemicals randomly banging into one another. This is an act of ruthless trust. Solomon SAYS it; He doesn't SEE it. But, based on what he does see Solomon attempts to make some sense of the enigma. In v.18 he concludes that God must be testing us, by allowing such injustice, so that we will see that we are, in ourselves, beasts.

There is no creature as bestial as man. In many respects he is worse than the beasts. Did the beasts pile up the bones of six million Jews? Did they enact laws sentencing 50 million unborn children to death? Nature may be red in tooth and claw, but man has drenched the earth in blood. Men, in their inhumanity and injustice, are beasts.

The second problem Solomon sees is death. This is another way we are like the beasts. In v.19 he asserts that what happens to the beasts; happens to us. They die and we die. Then, in the middle of v.19 he gives us four ways which we are similar to the beasts. He does this by repeating the word all. They all have the same breath, by which he means they all have some animating life principle, which eventually departs. All is vapor. The lives of beast and the lives of men are both mist. All go to one place. Meaning the grave. All are from the dust and all return to dust. As the Psalter puts it: Put no confidence in princes, nor for help on man depend, he shall die, to dust returning, and his purposes shall end.

In v.21 Solomon leaves it as an open question as to whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth. He will say in chapter 12 that the spirit of man returns to God who gave it. But here the key is to remember that Solomon is reporting, as he is in much of the book, what he SEES. You have no empirical evidence concerning where the spirit goes. Who knows, says the Preacher. You go to the funeral parlor. You stare at the corpse of your loved one. You don't see the soul rise. In this respect it is true we differ from the beasts, but we cannot assert that by what we see.

So, as he has done before, Solomon counsels in v.22, that there is nothing better than rejoicing in your work. But here he adds the idea that this is our lot. This is the portion, the time, the task we have been given. This doesn't remove the enigma of death, but there is nothing better than this joy in our labor in this world. For, as Solomon concludes, who can bring man to see what will be after him? Of course, we now stand on this side of the resurrection, so we can and MUST say more than Solomon. Christ IS risen. Death has been dealt a deathblow in Him. So, while we share Solomon's grief over our beast-like existence, we grieve with a hope that was yet future to him. And it is a hope which will not disappoint.

The third problem Solomon looks at is oppression. Chapter 4, verse 1: Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. The problem is pervasive. It applies to all times. This is a passage with great pathos. Solomon, like the prophets, and like our Lord, hungers and thirsts for justice in the earth. Thus, he is grieved by injustice. And, behold, he says, the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them! The sheer specter of defenseless human beings and their tears moves him. He weeps with those who weep.

On the side of the oppressors was power, and, he repeats himself concerning their victims, they had no one to comfort them! The situation is so bad that he says in v.2: The dead, who are already dead, are more fortunate than the living who are still alive. At least death brings an end to the misery. Fortunately, you can only be gassed once, or hung once, or executed once. Even torture doesn't work on a corpse. Man's sadism meets its match in death. Death itself, the grievous, enigmatic enemy, becomes a friend in view of the oppressions which afflict men under the sun. But, Solomon, wise genius that he is, has a niftier

solution in verse 3: But better than both is he who has not yet been born, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

I won't ask for a show of hands, but I suspect that none of you has this as their life verse. I've not seen this saying on any refrigerators: Death is nice, but non-existence is better. It's a divine arithmetic where zero (non-existence) is greater than one (living or dead).

Notice that those never born are not envisioned as having to, if they lived, SUFFER the oppression. He says that non-existence is better than life because you won't even have to SEE the evil deeds that are done under the sun. So, human oppression is so global and so horrific, the preacher feels like non-existence is a preferable option. Is this hyperbole? Yes, but there is also an extraordinary capacity for empathy here we would do well to emulate. In this way he anticipates John Donne who said the death of ANY man diminishes me. Do not ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.

The fourth problem Solomon addresses is envy. Verse 4: Then I saw that all the toil and skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. He is back to the driving question of gain in labor. Again, there is hyperbole here. But Solomon is correct in saying that envy is a powerful social force in the workplace. A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot. Rivalry and competition, no matter what economic system you prefer, are not unmitigated goods. To desire to destroy a person's livelihood under any guise, including the free market and free competition, is not a virtue.

The tenth commandment remains in force in the business world. You shall NOT covet your competitor's market share no matter how many pundits insist it's a virtue. We are a highly competitive culture. We are obsessed with winning and winners. So the most twisted nonsense becomes accepted as wisdom. When Vince Lombardi said "winning is not everything, it's the only thing," he was doling out demonic wisdom – and I loved the Packers as a kid. Every IBM exec I ever knew believed – you need to be obsessed with winning. This is NOT to deny a legitimate self-interest. No business would be possible without that. But envy and rivalry and covetousness are sinful in any form, including in the business world. Human solidarity trumps economic victory. Lawful competition doesn't have to be driven by envy. This does not mean, of course, we should not labor hard. V.5 shows the false alternative: The fool folds his hands and eats his own flesh. He does nothing and has nothing to eat but his own existence. By his laziness, he cannibalizes his own life.

So, the problem of envy driving our labor, does not mean we should be fools and fold our hands. The medium is struck in v.6: Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil and striving after wind. Ruthless competition and lazy foolishness are not the only options. This man labors, but is satisfied with a single handful rather than two grasping hands. More divine arithmetic. One

handful is BETTER THAN two. Less is more sometimes. Wealth is not always better. Work is vapor anyway, so don't put too much stock in it. It doesn't change anything fundamental about the world or the human condition. So work, but work to foster community. Godliness with contentment is great GAIN.

The fifth problem is isolation. Beginning in v.7 we see a man, a workaholic, with no family or heir, who is never satisfied with what he has, and labors only for himself. Solomon speaks in his solitary and sad voice: "For whom am I laboring and depriving myself of pleasure?" Here work is an obsession. More divine arithmetic. One is NOT better than zero. It is not good for man to be alone, and loneliness, not genuine reflective solitude, but loneliness, is a result of the alienation from the fall. Three Dog Night was right: One is the loneliest number that you've ever seen. And in v.9 Solomon extols the virtues of community.

In fact, this whole passage is tied together by this theme, injustice and oppression are suffered with no one to comfort, death is a dreadful lonely experience, envy and rivalry in work destroy community, and here we have a man who works FOR no one but himself. v.9: In the new arithmetic, two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. Community is intrinsic to meaningful work. Here Solomon actually sees some GAIN!

In v.10-12 there are three ways in which community helps, drawn from Solomon's world. In v.10 it can help if you fall along one of the treacherous roads in Israel. In v.11 it can help you keep warm on a cold Palestinian night. Here again two is better than one. In v.12 it helps if you come under attack. One is susceptible to attack, two can withstand it and – the misused wedding verse – a three-fold cord is not easily broken. Solomon is not talking about man and wife and God – but about human community. Two is better than one, and three is better than two. Three is not a crowd, it's a community. And the community provides, by God's design, assistance, comfort and defense.

Finally, the sixth problem is popularity, particularly political popularity. Here I will be brief. First, the proverb in v.13: better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. Wisdom means having a listening heart, it means being docile and teachable, being open to counsel. Fools stop listening. So the old king, once popular, isolates himself from the wisdom of the community. He is replaced in v.13 by the youth who was born poor and went from prison to the throne.

In v.15 the young ruler has amassed an enormous following. In v.16 we are told there was no end to all the people he led. Yet, and here is comfort for those afflicted with the regime they live under, the time will come when this young king will also be unpopular. Nothing is more vaporous than political power. The young king here, who evokes Joseph in his rise from prison, will suffer Joseph's fate. A generation will arise that knows him not. Andy Warhol may have been right: everyone may get their fifteen minutes of fame, but Augustine was wiser when he

said that, in our civic affairs, the dead and replaced by the dying. Kingship is lonely and vaporous. Solomon concludes: it too is vanity and striving after wind. The arithmetic reverses again: ruling a multitude cannot replace the bonds of a small local community.

Conclusion:

All these problems are all threats to Solomon's vision of God's sovereignty. And we cannot come to grips with them apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Observation will not do. He suffers the world's injustice and oppression; He suffers our loneliness in his life and dies our lonely isolated death. He is the victim of all our envious strivings. He refuses the path of fleeting political power, for the establishment of a band of twelve fishermen. The nucleus of the community that is the church. And what this passage drives us to affirm is that salvation means the restoration of true community. That is what the church is and what she is called to be. God sets the lonely in the family of the church, he calls us to visit those exposed to oppression, the widows and orphans, and even calls that pure and undefiled religion.

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