Sermon Notes: Ecclesiastes #7 — "But What About Human Suffering?"

Text: Ecclesiastes 4:1-8 — *Then I returned and considered all the oppression that is done under the sun: And look! The tears of the oppressed, But they have no comforter—On the side of their oppressors there is power, But they have no comforter. Therefore I praised the dead who were already dead, More than the living who are still alive. Yet, better than both is he who has never existed, Who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun. Again, I saw that for all toil and every skillful work a man is envied by his neighbor. This also is vanity and grasping for the wind. The fool folds his hands And consumes his own flesh. Better a handful with quietness Than both hands full, together with toil and grasping for the wind. Then I returned, and I saw vanity under the sun: There is one alone, without companion: He has neither son nor brother. Yet there is no end to all his labors, Nor is his eye satisfied with riches. But he never asks, "For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?" This also is vanity and a grave misfortune.*

Take Away: *Solomon returns to another cycle of his hard considerations. Here he views human suffering and doesn't simply dismiss the emotional response we have to it under the sun. Sometimes, even the wisest cannot give answers to the evil we see done to humans under the sun. Solomon doesn't try to square the circle. But he also doesn't leave the assembly without hope. While suffering is a reality of the curse and human evil, God's response also was not to explain it, but to act. Jesus didn't argue away human suffering, he entered into it through His passion on the cross.*

I. **How Should the Wise Respond to Human Suffering?:** *(References: Ecclesiastes 8:15; Job 3:11-17; Job 42:8)*

II. **Shouldn't We Grab at What We Can Get Then?:** *(References: Mark 15:9-10)*

III. **Where Can We Find Hope?:** *(References: Augustine, City of God)*

Review:

1. ***Last time we looked at another question from the assembly: "Certainly a just human government could establish something nailed down. Certainly the right kind of government could restrain or even end the assaults of time, chance, and death?"*** Solomon quickly dismisses this idea. Human beings, under the sun and with sinful hearts, can never bring about such a government who could secure utopia on earth. Solomon looks even at the seats of power with his own kingdom, based upon God's law, and still sees sinners acting in wickedness and injustice. Thus, the *totalizing narrative of human government does not bring peace and justice, but in fact inflicts upon the world totalitarianism.* For in order for time, chance, and death, to be defeated under the sun, *the human state must control all things.* This has never produced human flourishing but rather some of the greatest atrocities the world has ever seen.
2. ***Solomon is able to move so quickly in dismissing the totalizing narrative of human government because Solomon knows the human heart.*** It is, as the Prophet Jeremiah says, *"the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked."* Justice is not *natural* to the sinful heart. This is because Adam and Eve failed *to agree with God in discerning good from evil when they ate the fruit.* They desired to eat in disobedience to *be like God*, yet instead they were cursed to die like the animals. This means that human beings, apart from God's law and the gospel, *are terrible at defining good and evil for ourselves.* This deeper reality and pain of the curse. Humans watch animals die not thinking about being like God, *but now doubting where our soul might go when we die under the sun.* More than that, humans can become *beastly* by losing our reason and following our base desires without restraint. We can in our pride, lust, greed, envy, —become like animals.
3. ***Yet, it is at this low point that Solomon doesn't leave us.*** While the curse reigns and that means that we are subjected to *hevel* under the sun, God has demonstrated his love from *above the Sun.* Who can restore God's people? Who can bring, as the Psalmist says, "mercy and truth to meet together; and that righteousness and peace have kissed"? Is it not Jesus Christ who came to die for sinners? Yet, in order for us to have the peace He has brought through his cross, we must make the cosmic bet. We must put all the chips on the table. In order to live—*we will have to die.* The bet that man makes on *any* totalizing narrative is the *bet of his life.* Yet Christ is the only one who called that bet. Christ said he came to die and then be raised from the dead. Mohammed didn't do that. Gandhi didn't do that, Buddha didn't do that. Only Christ defeated sin, death, and the devil *by proving it through His resurrection from the dead.*

Questions for the Table:

1. Why is it often the wrong strategy to try to explain suffering to someone in the midst of it? What is a better option? When is the right time to think and reason about why evil and suffering exist in the world?
2. Why does Job and Solomon both lament that human suffering is so evil that it would be better to not be born? How should we read those statements with discernment as kings and queens?
3. Why is it foolish to respond to human evil with a *"I need to put me first and get what I can get"* kind of attitude? Why does Solomon say that is also *hevel.*
4. Discuss the growth of the seed of envy. How is envy different from covetousness? Why is the end of envy murder, either in one's heart or the actual committing of the act?
5. Consider what the famous 6th century Christian philosopher Boethius has to say about suffering. He wrote this while he was in prison awaiting execution for a crime he did not commit:

   I am convinced that adverse fortune is more beneficial to men than prosperous fortune. When Fortune seems kind, and seems to promise happiness, she lies. On the other hand, when she shows herself changeable, she is truthful. Good fortune deceives, adverse fortune teaches. Good fortune enslaves the minds of good men with the beauty of the specious goods which they enjoy; but bad fortune frees them by making them see the fragile nature of happiness. You will notice that good fortune is proud, insecure, ignorant of her true nature; but bad fortune is sober, self-possessed, and prudent through experience and adversity. Finally, good fortune seduces weak men away from the true good through flattery; but misfortune often turns them around and forcibly leads them back to the true good. (*The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius)