

Ecclesiastes: Chasing The Wind

Part 4- The Cruelty Of Life

INTRO:

- We are in our fourth week going through a very strange book
- Many of us may have never heard a sermon on this book.
- The man who writes this book references himself as a “preacher” who’s had it all says it’s all “vapor”
- Most scholars believe this preacher to be Solomon. A king who had it all, a member of the billionaire club. He had no wants or needs. Anything he could think of was only a request away.
- The “Preacher” who writes this book is running at all the hard tensions, dragging the listener into uncomfortable conversations about the grimness of life, the pain of disappointment & the stench of regret after living for all the wrong things
- Remember though that he’s the guy who’s done it all & had it all
- That guy gets up to the mic & says, “Listen up...it’s vanity!”
- I have been to the end of every rainbow and there is nothing, there certainly is not a little man with a pot of gold
- He says again and again that it is all Vanity= Meaninglessness, delusion, smoke, Vapor!
- You try to grab it & it disappears before your eyes. Like trying to grab smoke or fog
- Like a mirage, you run hard at it, thinking that’s where you’ll finally find satisfaction, but all you get is sand in your mouth!
- You might be thinking I came here to hear how good Jesus is and how can he fix my jacked up situation
- The fact is this subject is uncomfortable but the last thing we should do is ignore it
- Ignoring it leaves people like us w/ real feelings & questions to think that God has nothing to say
- Ecclesiastes runs to the weeping, head scratching hard places
- BUT it’s not to call us to abandon God but to show us that He’s there & nothing or no one else but Him makes a difference
- If you’re new to Christianity, doubting it’s relevance, I am glad you’re here & I sincerely hope this helps you today
- If you’re old to Christianity & you can’t understand why some people genuinely struggle w/ doubt...lean in & listen up!
- So far...tested pleasure, wisdom, knowledge, possessions...

- All of them have struck out in giving more than “vapor”
- Now we are going to talk about a super popular subject and that is the pain and sorrow of life.
- I am going to read...

Ecclesiastes 4:1-5:7- “Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold, the tears of the oppressed, & they had no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power, & there was no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive. But better than both is he who has not yet been & has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. Then I saw that all toil & all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor. This also is vanity & a striving after wind. The fool folds his hands & eats his own flesh. Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil & a striving after wind. Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, & his eyes are never satisfied w/ riches, so that he never asks, “For whom am I toiling & depriving myself of pleasure?” This also is vanity & an unhappy business. Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls & has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will w/stand him--a threefold cord is not quickly broken. Better was a poor & wise youth than an old & foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor. I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along w/ that youth who was to stand in the king's place. There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Surely this also is vanity & a striving after wind. Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. Be not rash w/ your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven & you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. For a dream comes w/ much business, & a fool's voice w/ many words. When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay

what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow & not pay. **Let not your mouth lead you into sin**, & do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry at your voice & destroy the work of your hands? For when dreams increase & words grow many, there is vanity; **but God is the one you must fear.**”

- I can certainly admit this is a super tough book and subject
- But can we be honest enough with ourselves and say there may not be a more relevant passage to reflect on?
- There have been many days in the past year where I have witnessed someone's life being forever changed with some type of suffering, why would I think the possibility of that happening to someone here today would be zero.
- I mean, we all go through seasons of life where tragedy strikes, and maybe just maybe that is you....today
- Often I think back to my life as a kid and how “safe” the world felt, especially here in ENC. Leaving my house in the morning and not returning until well after dark. No cell phone, never calling home, not a care in the world.
- Now, we live in a time w/ so much suffering & oppression that I would not even dream of letting my kids do the same
- Maybe I was just young and had no idea. I'm sure that was true to a point
- But I also think that the world is becoming a worse place...
- That's what Solomon observed...Said it was so bad it would be better to be dead...actually, better to have never been born!
- We're going to work through this the best we can but we will not be able to cover this subject as much as I would like

1. The World Is A Cruel Place To Live

- I am thankful my kids don't totally see this...won't be long :(
- I feel like there is the potential for them to be exposed to so many terrible things. And as a dad one of my primary roles is to protect them and keep them from harm. This is a constant battle of mine and every good parent wondering, “How much is too much?”
- I am waiting for the proverbial, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”
- **World is broken.** Actually, bad things happen to all people
- **But there are so many people who seem to be a target**

- The vulnerable. The weak. The sick. The elderly. The young. The poor. The uneducated. The unborn.
- All of them are historically prone to cruelty & oppression
- And, there are innumerable kinds of acts of oppression
- We may think this billionaire cannot relate or even know what is going on with little ole me, but we must not overlook verse 1.
- Solomon states, “I saw all the oppressions...” so many sad causes
- “Behold the tears of the oppressed...”- terrible suffering comes to those who are oppressed. Think of the Holocaust Museum’s room of stacked shoes.
- Well, thankfully we have lots of people in power to help...I mean people with power and prestige should be able to stop or at least help those in need....Right?

VS. 1a- “On the side of their oppressors there was power”

- Often It’s The People In Power Who Cause The Oppression
- This is a terrible reality. Those who are in charge are often the ones who are causing all of the pain & suffering or at the least turning a blind eye and condoning it.
- Why is that true? Greed, Insecurity, Pride, Arrogance, I am not sure but I feel like these hit the heart of the matter in most cases.
- Where was a slave to look when his master sold his kids, and then beat him while the government, our government, condoned it?
- Where does a child look when their parent assaults them or hears of their assault & doesn’t stand up for them?
- Solomon, a man with ultimate worldly authority, says I know how the system works. It’s often people in power condoning abuse
- They wink at the slave owner, the serial rapist...
- If there can be any comfort in this, it’s that it’s nothing new
- This has been going on for as almost as long as humans have been on Earth. Cain murdered his brother Abel
- Cain was the older brother. The one who should be more mature, stronger, more responsible, The one who SHOULD stand up
- The one who should’ve died protecting his little brother
- But he became the first of many in power to use it for evil
- Thousands of years later, we now live in a world soaked w/ tears & blood from thousands of years of oppression...much of it condoned by authorities

- You'd think that would make all of us social activist...
 - You'd think we'd all be fueled by compassion & empathy
 - But Solomon goes on to list how we live lives fueled by envy
- VS. 4- "all toil & effort comes from man's envy of his neighbor, this too is vanity, a striving after wind."

2. Instead Of Helping, Most People Chose To Look the Other Way

- Many times I have thought of this verse, "all toil & effort"
 - Sounds extreme! However, the more I've reflected on it the more I agree
 - How many of us have thought, "Man can you believe how many people are overdosing these days, that really breaks my heart, I need to get involved and make a difference. 20 seconds later...But did you see the new truck John just brought home...he must have sold a kidney. Maybe I should make an appointment with my doctor.
 - Here's a thought: I read an article recently talking about 6-8 year old kids being sent to private QB trainers so that by the time they are seniors in high school they are a shoe in for Division 1 football team and scholarship. Why?
 - Talk about Liam
 - Why do we as parents push our kids to get good grades...is it really so you're doing your best or so that you're better than others & get the scholarship?
 - Seriously... I have 5 kids, college tuition is not getting any cheaper...so your kids better shape up
 - "Alan, that's just the way the world works" EXACTLY!!!!
Well my push back to that response is that we are called to not be like this world, I mean good Lord we just spent an entire series working through 1 Peter entitled "Hope in Exile"
We are sojourners, we are aliens
 - It is possible to have effort & toil that isn't driven by envy
 - But it's not possible to do that w/out massive intentionality
 - Consumerism is a type of self-soothing that we don't grow out of
 - But, this envy & consumerism has got it's own kind oppression
- VS. 7-8- "Again, I saw vanity under the sun: one person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there is no end to all his toil, & his eyes are never satisfied w/ riches, so that he never asks, "For whom am I toiling & depriving myself of pleasure?" This also is vanity & an unhappy business."

- He doesn't have a son or a friend (Brother)...alone & giving himself to things that can never love him or satisfy
- **All Of This Selfishness Leads To A Exhaustingly Meaningless & Lonely Life**
- That's the context of all of Ecclesiastes
- The exact opposite of being happy b/c you ignored the plight of the poor & the oppressed & got all the stuff your neighbor had...
- You actually find yourself increasingly vulnerable & lonely
- You work to find that, "there is no end to your toil"
- No matter what you get, "your eyes are never satisfied"
- You NEVER ask, "What is all of this for?"
- You too find yourself enslaved to an "unhappy business"
- No brother (friend), or child, or anyone to share life w/
- "Two are better than one..." No thanks! Then I'd have to share!
- **Alone & giving yourself to endless work to get endless stuff that will never love you back or come close to satisfying you...**
- That is a terrible existence that too many are familiar w/
- Whole cities seem to be built around this kind of living
- Solomon, surrounded by money, possession & pleasure, no doubt feels the loneliness he's so accurately articulating
- I can almost hear him shouting "Please listen to me, IT'S ALL VAPOR!"
- **In a world full of suffering, please don't buy into an envy fueled life of loneliness & consumerism...that's wasting your life!!**
- **So, what should we do about all of this oppression???**

3. Acknowledge This Is The Way Of The World

- This seems minor but it's not
- I think Solomon, from his place of immense privilege, "seeing" the plight of the oppressed is a MAJOR THING
- That guy could've definitely made sure he didn't encounter
- You can pay to not encounter suffering if you have enough \$
- Think of it like the all-inclusive resort. You land. You get whisked away to a massive gated facility where you never leave or see any suffering. Those who wait on you endlessly, likely live in total poverty, but they are paid to smile & pretend
- Your beach doesn't have any litter or any beggars
- Those people are forbidden from bothering you
- Not saying that vacation is bad or that an all-inclusive is bad or that anyone who stays there doesn't care about the poor

- I'm simply trying to show how you can buy deniability
- Solomon could have, but for whatever reason, he didn't!
- The first step is to "see" the oppression & the suffering...
- Consider how you've processed the whole "Me Too" movement
- Many people who have never been sexually assaulted or raped are often heard saying things that show their disbelief
- One of the worst things that a victim can hear is disbelief
- It's why so many people suffer in silence!
- The first step to helping people who are oppressed is accepting that this world is the kind of place where cruel things happen
- Acknowledging that we have played a part
- When we look at pornography, for example, we contribute to the kind of world where women (mostly) are exploited for their body
- Article about Deputy Sheriff and middle school teacher
- We play a part in the oppression & the suffering
- "But it's on the Internet, it's free" "Someone's paying!"
- When the kind of person Solomon writes about here finally picks his head up after a life of living for himself, the first step is to admit that, for many, the world is a very hard place to live
- I am convinced that every American should take at least one trip to rural Central America, Africa, or Asia. Perspective is so huge in influencing our lives and the decisions we make and I feel like that trip could help change our perspective
- For some of us, we are totally aware of the oppression
- For some of us, this is the first step, coming to terms w/ the place that we live & admitting it's not the same for everyone

4. Make Sure You're Not Part Of Causing The Oppression

- The world we live in is a good place to be if you want to take advantage of people
- Why do we need so many lawyers, Insurance agents, Judges?
- Why do you sign so many documents when you buy a house or car?
- We need lots of mediators b/c everyone is out to scam you
- So, it's possible & it's easy, but it's wrong!
- One of the ways that God always wanted his people to stand out was by being the people who didn't take advantage of others...
- Now, some times, those causing oppression don't even know it
- That's one of the benefits of good Christian community
- We should be surrounded by people who can call us out

- We don't want to be like the king that Solomon mentions who no longer takes advice...surrounded by people who won't challenge
- This is a great challenge to all of us who are in leadership
- The way of the world is always "lording over people"
- Matthew 20:25-28- "But Jesus called them to him & said, "**You know** that the rulers of the Gentiles **lord it over them**, & their great ones exercise authority over them. **It shall not be so among you**. But whoever would be great among **you must be your servant**, & whoever would be first among you **must be your slave**, even **as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, & to give his life as a ransom for many.**"
- Jesus said, I want your leadership to look like sacrifice!!
- I don't want your leadership to look like crushing those under your feet
- We all expect that to be true of the church, but these weren't just the future church leaders, they were disciples of Jesus!
- **Managers, owners, city or county leaders, elected officials, parents, older siblings, etc...** all of us are given responsibility
- **Christians who have influence have the challenge of leading like Jesus did, laying down our comfort in exchange for those around us flourishing!**
- We don't look the other way...we don't participate in causing...
- If we're going to do that, we are swimming against the rip current
- Maybe right now we feel ready to do it...turn away from selfish evil desires...
- What's the best motivation for actually doing this?
- The next thing Solomon says is a reminder to fear God...
- There are a lot of hard things in here, "he has no pleasure w/ fools" "God is the one you must fear"
- What is this? It's a REMINDER & it's an INVITATION
- It's a REMINDER in a world full of powerful people oppressing others less fortunate that there is a God in heaven who sees it all & will take action
- It's an INVITATION to not be foolish, pretending like coming to God is just about you doing some religious duty, but to come to Him in a position of humility for who he is, listening to him...
- But why say that after all of this about oppression?
- We are not to go along w/ the way of world or give up...

- We are not to think that fighting the power is all we've got

5. Put Your Hope In God Who Will One Day Make Things Right

- We live in a hard world, but Jesus is coming back
- Slaves sang songs that lifted the eyes
- In the darkest of places, God comes & lifts our heads
- We hope in him who sees all the oppression & has a plan!
- Micah 7:1-4a- "Woe is me! For I have become as when the summer fruit has been gathered, as when the grapes have been gleaned: there is no cluster to eat, no first-ripe fig that my soul desires. The godly has perished from the earth, & there is no one upright among mankind; they all lie in wait for blood, & each hunts the other w/ a net. Their hands are on what is evil, to do it well; the prince & the judge ask for a bribe, & the great man utters the evil desire of his soul; thus they weave it together. The best of them is like a brier, the most upright of them a thorn hedge."
- Micah goes on to say you can't even trust your own family...
- Maybe that's how you feel right now. What should you do???
- Micah 7:7- "But as for me, I will look to the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me."
- Your Redeemer lives. The blood of Abel cried out for justice & it was answered w/ the blood of Jesus that cries out for salvation!
- Jesus will one day come back & vengeance will be his!
- And when he's done taking out his wrath on evil, those who suffer will once & for all be comforted by Him
- Revelation 21:3-5a- "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is w/ man. He will dwell w/ them, & they will be his people, & God himself will be w/ them as their God. (Who's he w/???) He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, & death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new."
- This is a promise to all who weep, mourn, suffer, hurt or are oppressed!!!
- He will one day make all of that the past
- He will one day make all things new
- He will one day be w/ us, dwelling w/ us forever
- What does that guarantee? That no one can ever hurt us again!

- That's the fear that oppressed people live w/...hurt again
- When is he coming back?
- But Jesus promises that we will never have to fear again
- Scripture refers to this as our "our blessed hope"
- Titus 2:11-14- "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to **renounce ungodliness** & worldly passions, & to live self-controlled, upright, & godly lives **in the present age**, **waiting for our blessed hope**, the appearing of the glory of our great God & Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness & to purify for himself a people for his own possession **who are zealous for good works.**"
- Lastly, what does this "blessed hope" cause us to do???
- Be "zealous for good works" How does that apply?

6. Be Eager To Be A Source Of Comfort For The Oppressed

- We've historically been better at waiting for our blessed hope than being zealous for good works
- We are a people who are both looking forward to Him returning AND are seeking to live like He's shown us how
- We often pray these words, "Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven"
- We are zealous to do good works now so people see Heaven
- Matthew 5:16- "In the same way, let your light shine before others, **so that** they may see your good works **& give glory to your Father who is in heaven.**"
- We typically do good works so that we get in heaven
- We are so prone to fall back on earning our salvation, keeping our salvation. I sinned so I must do X,Y,Z to return back into the favor of God.
- BUT THAT'S NOT WHAT JESUS SAID
- It's his good works, not our good works that get us into heaven
- Sadly, for many people, hearing that can/will cause apathy
- If good works aren't going to get me in, I'm going to party
- NO! Your good works don't get you in, but they help others get in! They point others around you to your Father in Heaven!
- One of the most overlooked ways we can do that is by being a source of comfort for them when they are oppressed...
- This part keeps sticking out to me, "**AND there was no one to comfort them.**" Like that is a separate evil altogether!

- Not enough that they are going through this
- **They are going through it alone w/out any comfort!!!**
- We cannot fix everything, but we can do our best to comfort those who are oppressed.
- **We should be people ZEALOUS to do these kinds of things**
- Why do I volunteer as chaplain for the NFD, comfort the oppressed
- Why do so many in our church foster, to comfort the oppressed
- Why do so many help women who've been battered...
- Why do we partner to rescue those in human trafficking...
- Why do we support local ministries to the poor...
- Why do people in our church do meals on wheels...
- Why do people in our church visit the sick & bedridden...
- Why do we care about racial inequality...
- Why does this pastor head into East Syria...
- Where do we get all this comfort? Well, it better be from Him
- 2 Corinthians 1:3-4- "Blessed be the God & Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies **& God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction,** w/ the comfort w/ which we ourselves are comforted by God."
- If it's not, you & I will find ourselves crushed by the weight
- We will start to buckle under the pressure
- We will be running on fumes, instead of his endless supply
- One of the values to times like this is getting recharged w/ reminder after reminder of how great he is...we get filled up on His comfort so we can go & be a source of comfort...

RESPONSE:

○ Here & Not Yet A Christian

- I hope today was helpful
- I hope this message helps you realize your need for Jesus. Nothing will fill that desire, that hole in your life like Jesus. He is the one and only thing that can and will fulfill every need, every desire, every hope you could ever imagine.
- Jesse and I would be honored to speak with you more about this Jesus after the service

○ Here & Already A Christian

- This is a great reminder to realign ourselves, our desires, our hearts with the one that paid the price.

- The one that earned your life.
- If you find yourself trying to keep up with the Jones's, trying to pour yourself into anything but Jesus, let this be a time where we repent and realign our hearts fully committed to him who is worthy
- We do this by taking
- **Communion & Giving**
- Come remember the one who suffered for you...gave up...
- Come & ask that he fills you again w/ his comfort
- You will never suffer for your sins. You will one day never fear