

## **THE PROBLEM OF PAIN: A SERMON FROM ECCLESIASTES**

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BCS Chapel, September 18, 2014

Yesterday some of my family's dearest friends from the north campus woke up to a new day, unaware of the nature of the mercy that would be needed. By noon their one-year-old was in ICU having had multiple seizures and loss of breath. What a comfort to know we have a God who is in charge, who knows, and who cares. He promises to shepherd us even through the valley of shadow of death. "So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many" (Eccl 11:9). How dark this cursed world can be, and how beyond our understanding!

In my own life I have tasted the curse through the death of a brother, the death of a child through miscarriage, the loss of a boy that we fought to bring home through international adoption but were not allowed to, various marriage challenges, and the trial of abandonment having never connected with my biological father until last year.

In one way or another, all of us in this room have tasted the curse's bite. It comes in small ways like leaky faucets, a cracked iPhone, blown tires, or broken bones. But it also comes in more substantive suffering like the divorce of parents, sexual abuse, the baggage of past sin, unsaved loved ones, abortion and all its burdens, fear of lack, grief of loss, the death of loved ones. When honest, everyone in the world must admit that mental and relational, physical and emotional suffering is real. And the presence of pain creates a theological problem.

Stated simply, the problem of pain is this: If there is a God worth trusting and following, he must be all good and all-powerful. But if he is all good, why would he let the evil of suffering exist, and if he is all powerful, why wouldn't he stop it? *Why does an all good, all wise, all-powerful God let pain persist?*

My message today comes from the book of Ecclesiastes, and I invite you to turn there. The sermon is divided into two parts: (1) Our problem of pain and God's providence, and (2) an answer to the question, "Why does pain exist?" Perhaps more than any other biblical book, Ecclesiastes wrestles deeply with the problem of pain—yours and mine. My interpretation of this book is different than many, but I hope to show you from the text why I believe he was a godly sage who grasped reality rightly. For my own family, the Preacher's ponderings over pain and his hopeful conclusions have served as a great guide and comfort to my own family through life's various trials. Turn with me to Eccl 7:13–14, which will serve as our starting point.

## Our Problem of Pain and God's Providence

- Eccl 7:13–14. Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked? <sup>14</sup> In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

Pain. . . . The work of God. In this text, the two are brought together. In verse 13, it is God who makes things “crooked,” and in v. 14 God makes “the day of adversity”—literarily, the “evil day.” And he does so in a way that leaves us fully out of control, not knowing what will come next. He is in control; we are out of control. And the text calls us to consider this. There is something we are to gain by pondering the relationship of pain with the bigness of our God. Such awareness of God's sovereign control of all is to move us somewhere. “As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God *who makes everything*” (Eccl 11:15).

God is the maker of everything. In 12:1 we are called to “remember” our “Creator,” who moment by moment is speaking all things into existence (Heb 12:3). In the days of goodness, we are to dive into that good wholeheartedly, and in troublesome days, we are to reflect, allowing our lack of control, our inability to understand to move us to remember that God is still in charge.

The Preacher calls us to “see” or, ESV, “consider” God's works, and in doing so he requests that we journey with him his path of discovery. So many in this world look but don't see. Yet the Preacher has eyes more like Sherlock Holmes than Dr. Watson, and in this book he leads us on a journey of reflection on the deeds and bigness of God.

- Eccl 1:13–15. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. <sup>14</sup> I have *seen* everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. <sup>15</sup> What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.
- Eccl 3:10–11. I have *seen* the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. <sup>11</sup> He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.
- Eccl 8:16–17. When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to *see* the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes sleep, <sup>17</sup> then I *saw* all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done

under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

Did you hear that ring of man's ignorance in many of those verses? God is working all things in this world in such a way that we are left unclear as to the full range of his purposes and uncertain about what will come next. Back in 7:14, God works in such a way that "man may not find out anything that will be after him." "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom 11:33).

The depths of God's purposes are unfathomable. It's not that we can't know something about what God is doing; it's that we can't know everything, and this is vexing. This is partially what I think is meant in 7:13, "Who can make straight what he has made crooked?" I cannot align it. I cannot figure it out. But these words also point to the fixed nature of God's providence. "I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it" (Eccl 3:14). "Whatever has come to be has already been named, and it is known what man is, and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he" (6:10).

God has ordained an unalterably vexing world—vexing due both to our suffering and our weakness. According to the Preacher, the pains of this life grow out of the soil of the sheer monotony of life's repetitions (1:4–11), the fleeting nature of wisdom, skill, and wealth (2:21; 5:16), the fact that one's life is simply forgotten after death (2:14–16), and the realities of ignorance (3:11; 11:5), injustice and oppression (4:1), envy (4:4), discontentment (4:8; 6:2), financial loss (5:13), persistent battle with sin (9:3), and unexpected trial (9:12; 11:2). God's curse has generated a world where rebel and remnant alike experience birth *and* death, laughing *and* weeping, peace *and* war (3:2, 8). There is a time for all of this "under the sun," and as the Preacher considers such things, he uses terms like "unhappy business" (1:13; 4:8), "vexation and sorrow" (1:18; 2:23; 5:17; 11:10), "great or grievous evil" (2:21; 5:13, 16; 6:2; 9:1), and "darkness" (5:17; 11:8).

But the Preacher was not a pessimist, only a realist and a God-honoring sage. Your world, my world was described by the Preacher in a way that is to move us to God.

And we have seen that he was not an atheistic naturalist that believed all things in life are random, meaningless, and pointless. No, God controls all things "from the beginning to the end" (1:11), and the mere presence of pain signals a deep conviction in life's meaning. Not only this, as we will see, God ordains pain with purpose; life is not "vanity" or "pointless."

Finally, the Preacher was also not a dualist, thinking that there was an eternal battle between two equal forces whose nature as dark or light is only a matter of one's perspective. Indeed, the Preacher recognized what we must affirm—that if real pain is

a universal problem then truth is not relative but absolute, that health and sickness are not just two realities but that one is better than the other, that the presence of good *and* evil, right *and* wrong, pleasing *and* painful demands a standard outside of ourselves, and that there must be a God that sets all measures of value in the universe. The problem of pain does not cancel out the possibility of an all-good, all-powerful God. Rather, the problem of pain argues for his existence. To take the step of calling some things in this life universally sweet and others universally sour, the Preacher is declaring that there is a standard outside of this world upon which to measure reality. The very problem of pain necessitates the existence of God as the overarching controller of all things.

So if we ask the Preacher, “What then is the source of pain?” his response is crystal clear: “Consider the work of God” (7:13), which includes *everything*—both the days of prosperity and the days of adversity. “I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things” (Isa 45:7). There is a level of mystery here that leaves us feeling very small as we consider how big the God of the Bible is. Yet having considered and being humbled, we are in a position to find help, to find hope.

Do not perceive or portray God as smaller than he is. He is dangerously large, in charge of all things. He holds your future in his hands—every blister, every breath, every battle being guided by his sovereignty. “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand” (Deut 32:39). We must maintain that our God is this big, controlling all things, for the decisive source of our suffering is also the decisive source for salvation and satisfaction. Everything comes from God. We must not believe in a God who got caught off guard by evil, for how can we be certain that he won’t get caught off guard when he tries to help us? No! We need a God who is in charge of all, so that we can be certain he can meet all our needs in timely fashion. The Bible’s God is not caught off guard when days of darkness come; indeed, he is our Shepherd who will lead us through the very valleys he created for our good.

### **Why Does Pain Exist?**

We now must answer the pressing question, “Why?” As you look again at 7:14 you see that a key result of God’s absolute sovereignty is that we are left having no certainty about our future, unable to “find out anything that will be after” us. This conviction is similar to that of James in 4:13–15:

- Jas 4:13–15. Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—<sup>14</sup> yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring, What is your life? For you are a

mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.<sup>15</sup> Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”

Considering God’s absolute sovereignty leaves us humbled with a deep sense of dependence. Not only is our future utterly in his hands, but we are left unaware of thousands of God’s purposes for any key event. “Then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out” (8:17). “[God] has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what has done from beginning to end” (3:11).

Life is so much a mystery, an enigma, and this is exactly how God intends it to be. In suffering we ask, Why me? Why her? Why this hard? Why this long? Yet, like Job, we hear no answer. We gain no clarity—only more vexation. God has intentionally made the world this way. Why?

The clearest answer to why is found in 3:14.

- Eccl 3:14. I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything take from it. God has done it, *so that people fear before him*.

God has made the world with a mix of pleasure and pain “so that people fear before him” (3:14). Fear of God is a central theme in this book. Where enigmas persist, fear is demanded (5:17). It is the fear of God that keeps one from religious pride and deep wickedness (7:16–18). In the narrator’s words in 12:13–14, which sum up the Preacher’s message: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.<sup>14</sup> For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

Fearing God means to have a proper disposition toward his bigness and worth. We are not fearing God when our ignorance leads to rebellion or hatred of God. We fear God when suffering produces humility that leads to dependence, when our awareness of our utter hopelessness apart from him moves us to surrender to his purposes, even when we don’t understand them. Fear of God declares, “I will follow,” come what may, even through the trial and the tears and the ache of loss or abuse or lack or want or need. Fear of God is a conscious awareness that he alone can fill our emptiness and supply, satisfy, and save, all because he is the sovereign, and we are not.

Fearing God is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7; 9:10). Paul asserted that lack of fear of God is one of the world’s biggest problems (Rom 3:18). We are to be a people who “work out our own salvation with fear and with trembling,” knowing that the all sovereign God who holds our tomorrows in his hand is working in us, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil 2:12–13). God does what he does,

intentionally placing us in troubling contexts, “so that people fear before him” (Eccl 3:14)—to take our eyes off of self and others and to turn them to God.

To say it a different way, the problem of pain is answered by this maxim: God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. Our dependence magnifies God’s worth and puts us in a context to receive his help. “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:5). Therefore may we, with Paul and the Preacher, boast all the more gladly of our weaknesses, so that the power of Christ, our sovereign, savior, and satisfier, may rest upon us (2 Cor 12:9).

Why is fearing God so important that he would place us in such challenging contexts to see it generated? Because only those who fear will follow, and only those who follow will find eternal life. Look with me at 8:12–13.

- Eccl 8:12–13. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. <sup>13</sup> But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

“The advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it” (6:12).

Fearing God today enables you and I not to fear judgment tomorrow (11:9; 12:13–14)). The pains of the present are therefore a means of God’s grace to preserve us for the future. As you face the day of adversity and consider the work of God, can you see his kindness? “Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.” That is how William Cowper (A.D. 1731–1800) described these truths. In his poem, which we now call “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” he writes:

*God moves in a mysterious way  
 His wonders to perform;  
 He plants his footsteps in the sea  
 And rides upon the storm.  
  
 Deep in unfathomable mines  
 Of never-failing skill,  
 He treasures up his bright designs  
 And works his sovereign will.  
  
 Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,  
 The clouds ye so much dread  
 Are big with mercy, and shall break  
 In blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust him for his grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,  
Unfolding every hour;  
The bud may have bitter taste,  
But sweet will be the flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err,  
And scan his work in vain:  
God is his own interpreter,  
And He will make it plain.*

## Conclusion

“Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?” (Eccl 7:13). As we consider God’s work, how are we to perceive of him? Within this book the name Yahweh never shows up. Instead, the supreme savior, sovereign, and satisfier is always called “God” (*Elohim*), except in two places. In 12:1 he is given the title “Creator”—the one from whom, through, and to whom are all things. But in 12:11, he is called “one Shepherd.” Go with me there.

- Eccl 12:11. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd.

Wise words like those found in this book are like goads used by shepherds to guide their sheep to green pastures. They are like nails that stabilize one in the midst of life’s storms. And it’s “one Shepherd” that gives all this wisdom. Notice the capitalization, and hear the echo of the Shema—“Yahweh our God, Yahweh is *one*” (Deut 6:4). Some scholars question why God, the source of all wisdom, would be referred to as Shepherd in this text. But I see no better, no more hopeful title. If there is anything that the sorrowing, broken, and perplexed person needs, it is a Shepherd who is both willing and able to help, whether through provision or protection, service or guardianship. By calling God the “Shepherd,” we find hope in the midst of our own struggle.

The rhetorical power of the author becomes even more clear when we consider the use of the root that stands behind the term “Shepherd.” This is the only place God is called the Shepherd, but the root shows up nine times in two other forms, both associated with the enigmas of life, with the inability of humans to grasp the purposes of God (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9). In every instance of these

other forms, they are found in a phrase the ESV translates, “a striving after wind.” We are just going to look at two examples, both in chapter 1. First, 1:14–15.

- Eccl 1:14–15. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and *a striving after wind*.<sup>15</sup> What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

See the phrase “a striving after wind.” The word “striving” is based off the same verbal root rendered “Shepherd” at the end of the book. Here the Preacher declares that attempting to straighten this crooked world is like “a striving after wind,” or perhaps better, “a shepherding of wind.” If you try to shepherd the wind, you won’t have much success. Grasping God’s purposes in this life is like that—like shepherding wind. Now look at 1:17.

- Eccl 1:17–18. And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but *a striving after wind*.<sup>18</sup> For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

The more wisdom the Preacher gained, the more frustrated he became. Rather than finding answers he increased vexation. This is life for us under the sun. This the reality of the problem of pain. So how should we respond?

Our incapacity to shepherd or control reality should humble us in a way that generates a righteous fear of the one who has been effectively shepherding all things for all time. And because he is the “Shepherd”—the “one” provider and protector of all who fear him, we can rest confident that even in our unknowns he is working for his glory and our good.

Jesus picked up the imagery of the “one Shepherd” in John 10:16 and applied it to himself. “I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” A few verses later he asserted the comforting words: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one” (John 10:26–30).

If you are in suffering, know that you are not forgotten. We have a Shepherd who cares deeply for his sheep, and who will not let you go. The problem of suffering is answered by the presence of our saving Shepherd.