

Scan Bar Code- Letter Coming

Series Slide

We're continuing through the book of Ecclesiastes. This really strange book written by this guy that calls himself the "Qoheleth"- or the "Teacher or Philosopher"- it can sometimes be hard to grasp. But I've found that if I look around at the same kind of philosophical art that has been produced in the last couple of centuries- people are still saying a lot of the same things.

So, I'm going to rip a quote from the 1952 novel "East of Eden" by John Steinbeck to help us understand Ecclesiastes chapter 4. I'm not really going to explain the plot or characters of this book today— except for this. East of Eden is about, at least in part, the failure of humanity's ability to buy love. Love that is bought- and not chosen- is not really love.

"I am certain that underneath their topmost layers of frailty, men want to be good and want to be loved. Indeed, most of their vices are attempted shortcuts to love. When a man comes to die, no matter what his talents and influence and genius, if he dies unloved his life must be a failure to him and his dying a cold horror. - John Steinbeck, East of Eden"

One of the main goals of the Qoheleth in writing Ecclesiastes- is to get us to remember our death. Because when we remember that we are going to die, we tend to adopt a different perspective on what's important in the present.

And what Steinbeck says here is when you get to the end of your life- your talent...your influence...your genius...your money...will never make up for a lack of love.

Title Slide- "East of Eden: Why Injustice Makes Us Feel Powerless and Unloved"- Ecclesiastes 4

"East of Eden" is about the inner struggle that all of us want to be loved- and prove ourselves worthy of that love at the same time. But ultimately- we cannot. You either receive love that you can't earn...or you spend your time overlooking the love that has been there all along.

Jon Bellion has a fantastic song about this called "Stupid Deep" if you want it in a 21st century song instead of a 20th century novel.

But today- we're gonna look at it in the context of the Hebrew writings of the Qoheleth somewhere between 450 and 180 BCE.

Ecclesiastes 4:1-16

Again, I observed all the acts of oppression being done under the sun. Look at the tears of those who are oppressed; they have no one to comfort them. Power is with those who oppress them; they have no one to comfort them.

2 So I commended the dead, who have already died, more than the living, who are still alive. 3 But better than either of them is the one who has not yet existed, who has not seen the evil activity that is done under the sun.

4 I saw that all labor and all skillful work is due to one person's jealousy of another. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind.

**5 The fool folds his arms
and consumes his own flesh.**

**6 Better one handful with rest
than two handfuls with effort and a pursuit of the wind.**

7 Again, I saw futility under the sun: 8 There is a person without a companion, without even a son or brother, and though there is no end to all his struggles, his eyes are still not content with riches. "Who am I struggling for," he asks, "and depriving myself of good things? " This too is futile and a miserable task.

9 Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. 10 For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up. 11 Also, if two lie down together, they can keep warm; but how can one person alone keep warm? 12 And if someone overpowers one person, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not easily broken.

13 Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer pays attention to warnings. 14 For he came from prison to be king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom. 15 I saw all the living, who move about under the sun, follow a second youth who succeeds him. 16 There is no limit to all the people

who were before them, yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind.

1) Injustice makes us feel powerless & unloved.

Injustice & oppression are concepts that often get put in the realm of theory. Ideas. People groups.

Its one thing to say Russia has invaded Ukraine- and its not right.

Its another thing to sit across from a Ukrainian child who has lost both her parents in the war and she asks you “Why did this happen?”

With that question- you are getting close to what the frustration the Qoheleth feels in these first verses of chapter 4.

v 1

Look how he stresses they have no one to comfort them. Yes- this is anger about the oppression of the world- but there is an even deeper lament here about the loneliness of the oppressed. He is pointing out the tears of the oppressed. The powerlessness of those who have experienced the kind of life where they ask “WHY?” and no one can comfort them...no one can answer. Any answer of that question seems trite and uncaring.

v 3

He says its better to have never lived at all- because even if death relieves you from that loneliness- you experienced the deep ache of hurting- and having no one care about it. Better to have never experienced that lack of love than to have gone through the hurt.

Back to 1)

This is a deep ache. One that Jesus knows all too well. When one of his closest friends was really sick, Lazarus- Mary and Martha- Lazarus’ sisters- sent word to Jesus, because they knew Jesus loved him and had the power to heal him. But Jesus didn’t leave immediately to go to him. He waited 2 days. By that time Lazarus had died.

So when he comes back, Mary and Martha are dealing with this seemingly unanswerable question. Wait a second. If you have the POWER to heal & you say you LOVED him- Why- Why didn’t you come. Each of them say to Jesus- “If you would have been here, my brother would not have died.”

John 11:35-

That's where the Bible's most impactful pound-for-pound verse comes in. 2 words- and a WHOLE LOTTA POWER AND LOVE.

Jesus Wept.

Sure- he would go on to resurrect Lazarus. But not without stopping to mourn. To grieve. To be there with Mary and Martha in that moment. To not explain away or say "You silly women, why so emotional? Don't you know I'm about to raise him up?"

No.

In the moment of powerlessness and loneliness of people experiencing the WHY? of sudden death and injustice- Jesus weeps with them.

Back to 1)

This is what the Qoheleth is doing in these first 2 verses. He's not trying to fix the injustice.- He's describing how lonely and powerless it feels when you can't stop the ones you love from dying. You can't stop the cancer. The abuse. The cycle of poverty or addiction. It feels like no one can wipe away your tears.

Listen. I just want you know this morning- if you're there. The all-powerful, all-loving God of the universe- that you may be blaming (and I get it...I understand why...) I just want you to see- Jesus wept. He gets it, too.

TRANSITION: Now- Its from that place, the Qoheleth starts to talk about the way we try and treat this ache- what we do to make it go away- and this is where it gets dangerous.

2) When we feel powerless & unloved- we use our power to earn love- or reject it.

Remember what Steinbeck wrote in East of Eden?

"[Humans] want to be good and want to be loved. Indeed, most of their vices are attempted shortcuts to love."

Most of our vices- are attempts at earning love.

As Jon Bellion puts it in his song "Stupid Deep"-

"What if all the things I've done, are just attempts at earning love?"

When the whole inside my heart is Stupid Deep.

Why has life become a plan? To put some money in my hand.

When the love I really need is stupid cheap?"

The Qoheleth describes the broken response to this ache we feel when no one can wipe away our tears- or give us a solid answer to the question "Why?"

Back to 2)

We feel unseen. Unloved. and instead of receiving love from God- through others that is freely given- we feel like we either need to prove our selves worthy of it- or reject it altogether- because it feels like we'll just get hurt again.

What we want is togetherness- crying tears...what we settle for is jealousy- envy- give me what you have- I don't want you to have it.

Revenge. Ever get happy at someone else's misfortune?

that Jealousy manifests itself in 2 ways-

v 5-

laziness- despondent consuming "Might as well not do anything"

v 5 is both hands open

v 6-

overworking- no empty hand to receive. I hear this all the time. I need to prove myself

v 6 is both hands closed on the plow.

Better to have one hand open to hold someone else's hand..and another on the plow together.

v 13-14

Without this- you will become the oppressor from v 1 Neither age nor power insures wisdom and success. Once young and powerless, he nevertheless was astute and able to seize opportunity. Now, however, he is cut off from political reality.

One hand open...one hand on the plow. Work is important...we need money-

3) We are made for Relationship & Purpose.

Viktor Frankl- People in concentration camps that lived- were able to look to the future to see relationships and purpose- deep meaning.

v 9

Good reward for their efforts

One hand to pick him up, another to keep the plow moving forward

v 11-

emotional comfort vs the coldness of the world.

v 12-

protection- a third friend is even better

About a year ago, I found this song mash-up by the worship band- Mass Anthem.

Took Jon Bellion's Stupid Deep song- and it answered the the questions he asked.

What if all the things I've done were just attempts at earning love?

Cuz the whole inside my heart is Stupid Deep.

They mashed it up with the song Sinking Deep- whose lyric answers that question like this.

"Love so deep is washing over me

Your face is all I seek, You are my everything

Jesus Christ, You are my one desire

Lord, hear my only cry, to know You all my life"

Hebrews 12:1-2

the purpose is there- and the joy of relationship is there...which is the purpose.

Jesus- forgave. Loved enemies instead of becoming like his enemies. Jesus called people along with him in relationship while simultaneously calling us to mission.

Lords Supper

Jesus completely deserted- relationally.

And people mocked him that he lost his purpose.

To quote John Steinbeck- his death looked like a COLD Horror.

But actually- he was coming near to us- to warm us. to protect us from our own sin. To bring us into the three cord relationship- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit- that can never be broken.