

Ecclesiastes 3: Has the “problem of pain” a solution?

Prayer: Ps 119:73-80

In just a few days’ time we will be at the 100th birthday of C.S. Lewis (11/29/1898), and the 35th anniversary of his death (11/22/1963). Lewis once wrote,

I believe that many who find that ‘nothing happens’ when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pencil in their hand. (*God in the Dock*, 205)

Well, these thoughts that I have this morning grow out of a tough bit of theological study I did this past summer, involving exegesis, theology, philosophy, and apologetics; but, as Lewis says, I found my heart singing unbidden. I turn your attention to Ecclesiastes 3.

There’s nothing like a little pain to force you to be honest with God. I think of February 1990, when I was a church planter in Spokane and just about a month before our opening worship service. And before we knew my wife was pregnant with our first child it seemed she was miscarrying; we saw the GP in the morning, and the OB/GYN in the afternoon. Almost the next thing we knew my wife was in surgery for an ectopic pregnancy – a problem that could have made her bleed to death, and which meant certain death for the embryo. I remember sitting alone in my living room chair after it was all over, asking God “WHY?? Why put my wife through this pain and danger; why take away this little baby before we even had a chance to say ‘hello’ let alone ‘good-bye’? Is this any way to treat people like us who try to serve you?” – and getting no answer. There is no pain like the loss of your own child; and I felt that pain right down to my bones. I still don’t know “why” it happened, and I still feel the pain of the loss. Can this be the way God treats his beloved – or did I miss something?

I am reminded of a passage in Samuel Rutherford’s letters, where he writes to a man who has just experienced a particularly bad financial loss, and says, “I know this is no dumb Providence, but a speaking one, whereby our Lord speaketh his mind to you, *though for the present ye do not well understand what he saith*. ... I hope that you have been asking what the Lord meaneth.” Does God “speak” in every providence, and was he speaking in my loss? And did I just not get it?

This is a part of what philosophers call the “*existential* problem of evil”: why is there pain and suffering in *my* life, and how shall I cope with it? It’s a version of the larger “problem of evil,” namely if there is a God who is good and powerful, how can there be at the same time so much suffering and evil in the world? You can see that it’s more than just one of those mind-games we think the philosophers typically play: Aquinas saw the problem of evil to be one of the major threats to Christian faith, and I think he’s right – sensitive people really do wonder about this. And Christian philosophers such as C.S. Lewis, Alvin Plantinga, and Eleanor Stump (to name just a few) have addressed the problem and they have pointed out that you have to come to grips with human sinfulness, which means (a) we and the rest of creation don’t work right and (b) any good God intends for us must be aimed at

curing our sinfulness, and (c) we can't always tell how a given event fits into God's plan.

But whether you're sensitive or not, whether you're philosophically or apologetically inclined or not, at the level of our own lives, we all have to deal with the problem. I have turned us to a passage from Ecclesiastes which in my judgment helps us figure out a Biblical approach to this: in particular it acknowledges the limitations we have for ever really "solving" the problem, and it also helps us see what God expects us to do anyhow. From this passage I want us to see three things: 1/ the story of life is beyond our ability to understand it; 2/ God has given us reason to trust him; and 3/ even without a "solution" to the problem we can still carry on.

1/ THE STORY OF LIFE IS BEYOND OUR ABILITY TO GRASP.

The Christian doctrine of providence, namely that all events are the expression of God's perfect and personal purposes for each and every one of his people, is not an inference from observation. Paul Helm puts things very well:

Often there is a sharp disjunction between the view that God is in control, and the seeming chaos and meaninglessness of human lives, and human affairs in general. Is not this chaos a *disproof* of the Christian claim that God rules the universe providentially? It *would* be a disproof if the idea of divine providence were an empirical hypothesis, if it were built up only out of a person's direct experience and based wholly upon it. ... Rather, for Christians, reliance upon the providence of God, and an understanding of the character of that providence, is based upon what God has revealed in Scripture, and is confirmed in their own and others' experience.

Or, as C.S. Lewis put it,

There is, to be sure, one glaringly obvious ground for denying that any moral purpose at all is operative in the universe: namely, the actual course of events in all its wasteful cruelty and apparent indifference, or hostility, to life.

At all times, then, an inference from the course of events in this world to the goodness and wisdom of the Creator would have been equally preposterous; and it was never made.

In fact, the Bible indicates that to have it otherwise is not actually possible for humans. This comes out in the book of Ecclesiastes, whose key word is "find" (Hebrew *m-s-ʿ*), which there has the nuance "to find out, fathom by research." For example, (RSV)

3:11 He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity into man's mind, yet so that he cannot *find out* what God has done from the beginning to the end.

7:14 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. [Prediction is futile!]

8:17 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*.

Though we often hear that Ecclesiastes is primarily apologetic to the unbeliever, showing that unbelief leads only to despair, this is not so. In these examples "man" is the *pious believer*; in this book (as well as Job) it is *believers* who will find

themselves baffled in their attempts to make sense out of God's providential ordering of things. In a seminal study J. Stafford Wright put it this way:

We go through the world with [the author of Ecclesiastes], looking for the solution to life, and at every turn he forces us to admit that here is only vanity, frustration, bewilderment. *Life does not hold the key to itself.* ... Even the finest Christian philosophy must own itself baffled.

That is, the intelligibility of the world is always tantalizingly partial. This should make us skeptical about explanations like, "Well, God made your car break down because he knew there would be a big accident on the freeway" – after all, why then didn't he stop the big accident? And never say to anyone, "God took your child because he knew he wouldn't persevere" – can't God take care of that, too?

2/ NEVERTHELESS GOD HAS GIVEN US REASON TO TRUST HIM.

Does what I've said mean that Ecclesiastes would leave us with only a fideistic leap of confidence in God? If it does, I hate it. But let's make sure we know what would have to be true for us to call it "fideistic": it would have God telling us, "look, you just have to believe me, and I'm not going to give you any reason for believing." Is that how God addresses us? No it is not. Think instead of trust in a relationship: it's built on some experience, but trust always outruns the evidence, and finds confirmation in further experience. That's how God builds our trust in him (which is what "faith" is supposed to be).

Since Ecclesiastes comes in the context of the Bible, we should not suppose that we're supposed to take it apart from the canonical theology. Indeed, when we find the admonition to "fear God and keep his commandments" and the reference to certain judgment (12:13-14), we should see these as reminders of this theological context. That theology is built (among other things) on redemptive historical events, such as the way God showed himself to the patriarchs and to Israel in the desert, the way he delivered his people from Egypt, and proved his prophets to be reliable messengers, and the things that Jesus and his apostles did; not to mention his work of convincing us and sending his Spirit into our hearts to impel us toward faith and obedience. The best way to see these events is that they make God's interest in his people especially visible to our eyes – eyes that are unable to see his hand in everything. When we hear in church a testimony from a soundly pious believer, who tells us how she has seen this past week how God is faithful, ought we correct her by saying "God is always faithful and you lack the faith to see it"? Certainly not: of course God is always faithful, and we usually do not see it (and in view of the message of Ecclesiastes, we *cannot* see it); nevertheless he is faithfully merciful, too, and sometimes he helps his people to see it.

Is this rational? Well, if the situation between us and God is what the Bible says it is – namely, that he is infinitely wiser and holier than we are, and our resources are severely limited – then it is. For an analogy, consider my relationship to my children. I expect them to trust me, to suppose that I know what I am talking about even though they do not, and to suppose also that I care for them; and I expect them to *express that trust by obeying me*. For example, I tell my children not to walk in a parking lot without an adult holding their hand. Now the characteristics of cars,

and the mistakes that drivers can make, are beyond the experience of a young child – and what’s worse, many children think they can *handle* any situation that arises, and *we* know they can’t. Even if you explain some of these things to them, they won’t really *understand* – the most they can do is trust and obey. Or: my children have never experienced mistreatment at the hands of an adult; and yet in this perverted age I have to teach them to be careful of strangers. Below a certain age I can’t even explain to them what some of the dangers are; they just have to take my word for it. And of course, *they’re at their most rational when they trust me and obey.*

3/ EVEN WITHOUT A “SOLUTION” TO THE PROBLEM WE CAN STILL CARRY ON.

The key then to dealing with the “existential problem of evil” is to realize that you actually have two separate questions: the first is, “why has God brought about these events?,” and this is something that God does not expect us to answer – either for ourselves or for anyone else. The second is, “how can I submit to God’s sovereign hand?” – and I can usually find the answer to that. In Ecclesiastes, cf.

3:12-13, 17: I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; also that it is God’s gift to man that every one should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil. ... I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work.

9:7-10a: Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white; let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life which he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do with your might, do it.

12:13-14: The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

We must not make understanding the meaning of it all a pre-condition for our obedience.

This then leads to my applications. You see, the question for me in my pain is, “Has God given me reason to trust him?” and the answer is a resounding “YES!!” Then apply this to my circumstance: I must learn to say, “*God’s hand has brought this about,*” and that tells me everything I need to know, because every event in my life is an expression of the personal will of him who loved me and gave his own Son up for me. I don’t need to make believe it doesn’t hurt, I don’t have to argue, “well, it’s really not as bad as all that,” don’t have to pretend I see how it all works for the good: but I do need to say “no” to defiance, to all my efforts to extort an explanation from God, to try to get him to bargain with me: “OK, God, you take away the pain and I’ll be a good boy.” He is my Father, more perfect than any earthly father, who plans for me to live with him forever in bliss and purity that I cannot even imagine. If he thinks it’s worth it for me to endure this, then I’m going to pray like crazy for him to help me do just that, because I can’t do it on my own.

And speaking as someone in ministry, I see that the only way I can help people cope with their pain is to learn to cope this way with my own, so that – strange as it may sound – I’m actually becoming part of the evidence God is giving to the world that he’s so trustworthy, by the way God is making me tender, and loving, and prayerful, and holy, and by the way he keeps my loyalty even through such unspeakable pain.

Jesus calls us to be his disciples, to go to his school and learn from him. He’s the Teacher: he’s got the lessons we need, he’s got the pedagogy we need; and he shed his own blood to make us his disciples and his friends. Let’s pray together.

Benediction: *Heb. 13:20-21*