



# Ecclesiastes

## (18) The Dark Night of the Soul

Ecclesiastes 9:1-6; 11-12

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I've called this sermon, "The Dark Night of the Soul" because that is what the author of Ecclesiastes is describing in these verses. People of God who are thinking the kinds of thoughts that Ecclesiastes expresses in these verses are experiencing what can be called, the dark night of the soul. That phrase is used in a number of ways in the history of the church. I am using it to refer to feelings of darkness that God's people sometimes experience. The verses that are our text this evening, are an expression of despair or disillusionment with life. The author of Ecclesiastes has been examining life under the sun and what he observes has brought him to a very dark place in his soul. It has brought him to the place where he is questioning the goodness of God. He recognizes that God exists, and that God is sovereign over the world, but at the same time his observations about life lead him to the conclusion that life is pointless and hardly worth living.

Now we have considered the points that he makes in this passage in connection with in earlier passages in this book. Therefore, I'm not going to go through these verses in detail. I will just summarize what he says very briefly. What I want to do this evening is spend more time drawing out implications and applications rather than going through the text line by line.

So, he begins this section by reaffirming the basic biblical truth that everything is in the hand of God. "The righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God." But then he goes on to say that it is not clear from observations of life whether God loves or hates the righteous and the wise. That is his point in verse 1. The righteous are in the hand of God, but you cannot tell from looking at their lives whether God loves

them or hates them. And then he goes on to show why he says that. And his basic point is one that we have heard before – how you live makes no difference because in the end both the righteous and the wicked die and death makes life meaningless. It is better to be alive than dead, but not much. Verse 5, “For the dead know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.” These words come from someone who is experiencing the dark night of the soul. This is not normally the way that the people of God think. But this guy is a child of God and this is how he is thinking at the moment.

In verses 11 and 12 he makes the observation that things happen to people in arbitrary ways. He is saying that life is random. Everything happens by chance. There is no rhyme or reason to how people’s lives turn out. Verse 11 “Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all” Life is random and pointless. That is what he is saying. Verse 12 is an observation about suffering. We never know when we will be plunged into suffering. “For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.” Suffering can come upon us without warning and without rhyme or reason and it makes no difference if you are righteous or if you are wicked.

This guy is in a very dark place. This is the word of God, but what he is affirming here is not the teaching of the word of God. What he says is here is true in the sense that he is describing the world as it appeared to him. His words are true in the sense that from the perspective of what we observe about life, it seems to make no difference whether someone is righteous or wicked. Both have good times. Both have bad times. The world often appears to be random and meaningless. And everyone dies and is forgotten whether they were wise or whether they were fools. This is what we observe.

Now this is not the normal way that believers in God think. But one of the things that these verses teach us is that sometimes they do think

this way. And that is a very important point. It means that sometimes God's people become very discouraged and depressed and sometimes the overall message of Scripture does not comfort them and sometimes they have trouble believing that God is ruling the world according to any consistent principles and values. Sometimes they have trouble believing that God is really in control and they suspect that life is just chance and randomness.

Now a huge part of the message of the Bible is that this is not so. The Bible tells us that God created all things and that he rules and governs all things. The Bible claims that God sits on his throne and that it is a throne of justice and that he rules the world in righteousness and that in the end the righteous will be blessed and the wicked will be punished. It teaches that God's people can live in joy and hope knowing that God does all things right, that he is working everything together for their good and that he is preparing them for unending joy in his presence when his kingdom comes in its fullness. The Bible teaches that the fact that God is on the throne is reason for thanksgiving and praise and that the "sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18).

But this passage and many others teach that God's people sometimes are not comforted by those truths and that sometimes what appears to be contrary evidence from their experience or their observations of life carries more weight in their thoughts and their attitudes than the biblical teaching about God working everything together for good. Sometimes it can be their personal suffering that overwhelms them. Sometimes it can be the kind of thinking about life under the sun that we read in Ecclesiastes. But whatever the reason, the fact is that the faith of God's people is not always strong, and sometimes the doubts are strong. Sometimes, for whatever reason, everything seems dark and chaotic and random and cruel. Certainly, one of the points of this passage is that sometimes God's people find themselves in the depths where they think along lines that are similar to the observations of this passage.

One very dangerous way of thinking about the Christian life is to minimize how hard life can be. It is tempting to see it as the answer to

all your problems and a guarantee of an easy life. It is easy for us to think this way. All you have to do is to focus on some texts to the exclusion of others and fabricate a god in your mind on the basis of partial truths and wishful-thinking and it's easy to find yourself thinking that since God is all powerful and he loves me, I can expect to cruise through life with minimal suffering and maximal happiness and pleasantness. If you think about God and life in this way, you are going to be disappointed.

This passage shows us that life can be very hard for the people of God. Sometimes it is easy and pleasant. But sometimes it is very hard. It can be hard for various reasons. But there will be times in our lives when we may have trouble believing a lot of what God says to us in his word about working everything together for good and being a just and a loving and a compassionate God. So that is one thing that this passage shows us. This is the word of God and the word of God is showing us that sometimes the people of God have a very hard time reconciling what the Bible says about God and what their experience of life or their observation of life seems to be saying about God. We can sometimes experience the dark night of the soul where we question God and his ways with us or with the world in general and see life as pointless and not worth living.

A second point that we can draw from this passage is that God encourages us to express these thoughts rather than suppress them. It is easy to suppress our thoughts when they start to question God and his way with us or with the world. It is easy to say what we think God wants to hear. And that is understandable. We know that God's ways are higher than our ways. We know that the purpose of our lives is to please God and so we will tend to say the things that we think that God wants to hear from us.

But it is significant that God included Ecclesiastes in the Bible. God included this passage in the Bible in which the author is contradicting other parts of the Bible. The Bible is very pro-life – in the sense that it is positive about life for God's people. In this passage, Ecclesiastes is basically saying that life sucks. The rest of the Bible says that those who love God and seek to please him are blessed. This passage is saying that

you can't tell from their lives whether God loves them or hates them. The rest of the Bible says that everything that happens, happens according to God's perfect plan. This passage is saying that life appears to be random and without purpose.

The author of Ecclesiastes is basically complaining about God and his way of governing the world. God is the author of life. God says that life is meaningful. The author of Ecclesiastes says that death renders life meaningless. But God has included Ecclesiastes' complaint in his word. And by doing that God is telling us that Ecclesiastes' struggle is something that he cares about. By including this book in his word, God is teaching us that it is OK to express our complaints and our frustrations and our questions about his way of governing the world.

Notice that the author of Ecclesiastes is not rebuked for expressing his doubts and his protests. At the end of the book he comes to a better place than he is in the middle, but there is no hint that he is sinning by raising all these questions about God's goodness and by complaining about the contrast that he sees between God's justice and the way that things work in the world.

You can say that Ecclesiastes is a lot like the Psalms of lament in the book of Psalms. There are many Psalms in which the Psalmist is complaining to God about how God is not being faithful to commitments that he has made or that he is not acting the way that a covenant God should act towards his people. For instance, Psalm 10 begins with this complaint against God. "Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" This is not the way that God is supposed to treat his people! Later on, in Psalm 10 the Psalmist does express his faith that God hears "the desire of the afflicted" and "will strengthen their heart" (Psalm 10:17). But the opening lines of the Psalm complain that God is not doing that at the moment.

Psalm 44 is another example. Verse 9 says to God, "[Y]ou have rejected us and disgraced us and have not gone out with our armies." Verse 12 says, "You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them." And then verse 17 says, "All this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten you, and we have not been false to your

covenant.” And then 23-24, “Awake! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?”

Now on the one hand we can say that we are sinners and we deserve nothing but punishment and so we really have nothing to say if God makes us suffer. But that is not how the author of Ecclesiastes thinks and that is not how the Psalmists are thinking. They do not claim to be without sin. But they are claiming to be people whom God has chosen to be his own and who in these instances have been seeking to live faithfully before God. The category of righteous in the Bible does not mean sinless unless it refers to Jesus – otherwise it refers to people who are God’s people and who are forgiven and being renewed and are seeking to serve him even though they do that imperfectly. The psalmists sometimes complain that God is not treating them as his beloved covenant people. There are instances in the Bible where Israel is defeated by her enemies because of her sin, but there are other cases in which the psalmists protest that they have been generally faithful to God and it appears that he has forgotten them. They are complaining basically that God is not treating them in a way that they can expect to be treated as his beloved covenant people.

The point I am making is that both Ecclesiastes and the Psalms of lament are included by God in the Bible and that means that God encourages us to be open and honest and transparent about our struggles and about our complaints. This gives us permission to tell God what we are really thinking. This teaches us the kind of relationship that God wants to have with us. This does not mean that God is, in fact, treating us badly, but it does mean that it often *seems* that way - it sometimes seems that God has abandoned us or forgotten us. And God encourages us to be honest and open with him about our struggles. And also, to face and express how difficult life can sometimes be.

Here is how J.F. Bettler expresses this idea in an article in *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*. Speaking of the psalms of lament he writes, “These are Psalms of lament and God-centered complaint. Do you know that complaint can be a legitimate means of prayer? We always hear about thanksgiving, petition and intercession. But sometimes prayer is

complaint. These Psalms call out to God in complaint. ‘God, why are you doing what you’re doing? I don’t get it. You’re not acting like God. You’re a deliverer. You’re powerful. You’ve promised great things. Why are things so tough now?’ God gave us these Psalms as part of His grace and mercy. He hears our complaints. Sometimes the only faith we have is faith to call out and complain to God because reality conflicts with what God tells us to remember. That’s calling out to God; and He hears.”

Now the bible also speaks about another kind of complaining and that kind of complaining is sinful. For instance, when Israel was in the wilderness she was prone to murmur and complain about the hardships that she was enduring, and it is clear that that kind of complaining made God angry. In Numbers 14:27, God says “How long shall this wicked congregation grumble against me?” That kind of grumbling is not allowed. It is sin.

But the kind of complaining that we read in the psalms of lament and in the book of Ecclesiastes are not condemned by the Lord. And the reason is that they express pain and bewilderment rather than rebellion. There is a kind of complaining that comes from a sense of entitlement and a lack of thanksgiving. That is not what is happening in the psalms of lament and in Ecclesiastes. The kind of complaining to God that we find in the psalms of lament and in Ecclesiastes are more a crying out to God in pain and confusion. Why is this happening to me? Why is the world such a chaotic and cruel place? And that kind of protest is not only allowed, it is encouraged by the inclusion of examples of it in the Bible without censure or condemnation. There is a big difference between complaining because you are not living the lifestyle that you crave and wrestling with God because you feel that he has abandoned you or because of the agony of the horrific suffering and injustices in the world.

Now it is very interesting that while the Psalms of lament are one of the most common kind of Psalms in the Book of Psalms, it is difficult to find songs in our hymnals that are songs of lament besides the ones that are taken from the Book of Psalms. The difference in emphasis between the Book of Psalms and our hymnals is striking.

In a book called *Spirituality of the Psalms*, Walter Bruggemann writes that this lack of use of the psalms of lament is an indication that our relationships with God tend to be superficial. This is some of what he says, "I think that serious religious use of the complaint psalms has been minimal because we have believed that faith does not mean to acknowledge and embrace negativity. We have thought that acknowledgment of negativity was somehow an act of unfaith.... The point to be urged here is this: The use of these "psalms of darkness" may be judged by the world to be acts of unfaith and failure, but for the trusting community, their use is an act of bold faith.... It is an act of bold faith on the one hand, because it insists that the world must be experienced as it really is and not in some pretended way. On the other hand, it is bold because it insists that all such experiences of disorder are a proper subject for discourse with God. Nothing is out of bounds, nothing precluded or inappropriate. Everything properly belongs in this conversation of the heart. To withhold parts of life from that conversation is in fact to withhold part of life from the sovereignty of God. Thus, these psalms make the important connection: everything must be brought to speech, and everything brought to speech must be addressed to God, who is the final reference for all of life."

What Bruggemann is saying is that the psalms of lament teach us that our relationship with God must be one that faces the real difficulties and struggles of life and that speaks to God about these difficulties and struggles. These psalms teach us to be honest about how hard life can sometimes be and to be honest with God about the struggles that we have with some of the things that he allows to happen to us or with the kinds of awful things that we see happening in the world around us. This belongs to an open and transparent relationship with God and that is what God wants to have with his people.

Now it is helpful to notice that in most of the psalms of lament and in the book of Ecclesiastes the laments eventually reaffirm their trust in God's goodness and faithfulness. In Ecclesiastes you have expressions of faith along the way and especially at the very end of the book where he tell us that the end of the matter is "Fear God and keep his commandments" and "God will bring every deed into judgment." In

Psalm 44 the Psalm ends with a cry for help. “Rise up; come to our help! Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love!”

In most cases after the sufferer has made his complain, he reaffirms his trust in God and he waits for God to fulfill his purposes and keep his promises. But all of this belongs to the experience of God’s people and God encourages us to speak to him about the questions and doubts that we experience.

The fact of the matter is that God is working towards the resolution of the problems that his people face. Concerning our text in Ecclesiastes, God is working towards defeating the awful curse of death. The reality of death was a terrible burden for the author of Ecclesiastes. And death is a terrible thing. And when you look at life only in the light of our experience, you can only come up with the kinds of conclusions that the author of Ecclesiastes came up with. Death cuts down both the wicked and the righteous and it as far as this life is concerned there is often little difference between the outward experiences of those God hates and those God loves.

But the anguish that Ecclesiastes expresses is addressed by God’s plan for defeating death through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In Ecclesiastes’ time, this was not yet very clear. And that means that God’s people who struggled like Ecclesiastes did, simply had to trust in God and live with the tensions between what they observed in life and what they knew about God.

The fact is that God is a God who both reveals things to us and hide things from us. God has revealed many things about himself to us. He wants us to know him. Indeed, Jesus tells us that eternal life is to know God and to know Jesus. And God has revealed to us many things about his plans and his purposes. But at the same time there are ways in which God hides himself and what he is up to from us. Part of that might be our limited capacity to understand. If you think of Ecclesiastes’ observations, his problems were based on the fact that God seemed absent and uninvolved with the world. When you think of the world and life in this world simply on the basis of what you see, it often looks as if the world is not being directed by any divine purpose. On the one hand we can see the power and glory of God in the creation, but on the other

hand we cannot see the purpose and justice of God in history and in the way that things happen in the world.

God has made this distinction for us in a verse like Deuteronomy 29:29 where he says, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the works of his law.” This is where Ecclesiastes ends up as well. Fear God and keep his commands and trust that justice will be done – trust that what God is doing does make sense and one day we will see it.

And the greatest example of that principle is the cross. 1 Corinthians 1 makes the point that the cross shows us that the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men. God’s wisdom often looks like foolishness and God’s strength often looks like weakness. This is something that the author of Ecclesiastes did not understand. The world seemed to him to be a chaotic meaningless mess. Righteousness and wickedness seemed to make no difference. And yet God was and is directing it all for the coming of his kingdom and the defeat of sin and death and the renewal of all things.

We have more to go on than the author of Ecclesiastes did, but as far as what we see with our eyes in the world around us, nothing has changed. We still can’t understand God’s way with the world. We still can’t see how righteousness and wickedness makes much difference as far as life under the sun is concerned. How God is bringing his kingdom is still very much hidden from us. But we have what God has revealed to us in his word about his salvation and his purposes and in the light of that we wait – even in those times when we are experiencing the dark night of the soul. We are to walk by faith and not by sight.

And so, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4, “we do not lose heart.... For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”