**BCM Bible Study: April 21/22, 2021**

**Ecclesiastes 9-10**

Worrying About Tomorrow: **Read Ecc. 9:1-6**

* Looking first at verses 1-2, what is the overall point the Teacher is making? (Everyone experiences good and bad, and ultimately death.)
* Verse 3 continues this point saying that all people experience “evil” or misery during this life. We are all touched by “madness” whether it be in our own thinking or the thinking of others.
  + How have you experienced the reality of these verses – the “mixed bag” of good and bad in life?
* Verses 4-6 are tricky, but I believe this summary captures the point: “Life may bring its own trials, and it may sometimes seem that it would be better to be without them; yet in the end, life is better than death.” (Provan)
  + What does the Teacher say when he looks at the inevitability of trials?
  + **Read 1 Peter 4:12-14, James 1:2-4**. What do these verses say about trials? How does the Bible tell us to engage with trials?
  + We must remember that Jesus’ life on earth was difficult. He experienced isolation, ridicule, abandonment, and eventual physical harm and death. He and the apostles say that as His followers, we can expect the same thing. But consider this: **Read 2 Cor. 12:9-10.**
    - What is the message of these verses?
    - How have you seen God work in your weakness or trials?

**Read Ecc. 9:7-12**. We have talked about the concept in verses 7-10 quite a bit in previous studies. Have you found that this idea is difficult for you to live out? Why or why not?

* Verses 11-12 serve to wrap up this section. What is the Teacher’s conclusion statement?
  + People are acutely aware that bad things might happen in this life. A common response to this awareness is to buckle down and try to take control of reality. Some try to gain an edge with money or knowledge. Others try to manipulate God with good behavior or prayers. In what ways do you try to gain control of life?
  + **Matthew 6:31-34**. What is Jesus’ response to such thinking? Why do you think it’s difficult for you to trust that Jesus will provide for you?
* At the heart of much of this section is a desire to live a fulfilling life and see things play out like we hope they will. In our society, “we are given ever-increasing permission to ignore – and if necessary dispense with – whatever and whoever stands in our way in this quest, be it life in the womb, children, spouses, the poor, foreigners, or the aged.” (Provan)What future plans/hopes define your life right now? How does this quote challenge you?

Living in a Backward World: **Read Ecc. 9:13-10:3**

* What is the message of this story?
* How have you seen strength valued over wisdom and discernment?
* Have you seen a foolish person or idea overvalued? How did this result in the destruction of good? (9:18)
* 10:1-10:3 expands on this idea with some proverbial statements. 10:3 brings us to a puzzle – the fool parades his foolishness, and yet people commonly value his foolishness over and against wisdom.
  + Why do you think wisdom is undervalued compared to strength or foolishness?
  + **Read 1 Cor. 1:18-21**. What do these verses say? How does the wisdom of the cross compare to the wisdom of the world?

**Read Ecc. 10:4-11.** What are some truths that the Teacher reports in this section?

* This section and the following are difficult to understand so I will attempt a summary: The general tenor of this chapter is that the world we live in is always going to be upside down to some extent. Rulers will value foolishness and the social positions of the poor and rich will be swapped. Acknowledging this leads us not to resignation, but assessing how to live wisely in such a world. (Note: we will look again at 6-7 in the next section)
  + What wisdom does the Teacher offer for living in a broken world?
  + Verses 8-11 discuss the difficulty of living in the world. The dull ax in v.10 is a metaphor for a wise person who is not having the desired success. In such a situation, perseverance is needed.
    - In what areas of life is perseverance difficult for you? What makes you want to give up?

**Read Ecc. 10:12-20.** First focus on 12-15. What is the fate of the fool in these verses?

* What makes this person foolish?
  + As we have seen, this person is still convinced he or she possess control over life. But in the end, though he or she thinks they know much, their lack of knowledge is comparable to not even knowing the way to town. There is a paradox here; the fool gains knowledge, but becomes less wise.
    - What is the difference between knowledge and wisdom? How could the two intersect?
* Now turn to verses 16-20. Consider also 10:6-7. What is the message of these verses? Is it surprising to you?
  + A general theme in this chapter is that social order that is both broken and inevitable. Look, for instance, at Prov. 19:10. God has instituted human rule, and though it is broken and power is corrupted, it is still to be honored. The problem isn’t with the way God ordained things – the problem is with our corruption of those systems. Power isn’t meant to be used for personal gain, but it is. The response to brokenness is not always to overthrow the current order (this would be using power to overthrow power, which is not the way of the cross) but to learn to live in a broken world.
  + **Read 1 Timothy 2:1-4, Romans 13:1-2, 1 Peter 2:13-17**. What do these verses say about our relationship with rulers? Why are we called to act this way?
    - What does this mean about advocating for justice? **Read Isaiah 1:17, Matthew 23:23.**
    - Do you struggle with relating to the authorities as described in the Bible? Why or why not?

Conclusion: These verses challenge us to approach the world with humility and meekness, knowing that God alone is in control. What act of service can you do as an outward sign of this acknowledgement of this humility? (Bonus points if this is done for an enemy!)

Notes:

* The details of 9:1-2 could create some discussion. “Love and hate” is probably just another way of saying “good and evil.” Even taken literally as experiencing love and hate, we have experienced that this is true. The pairs of people that follow are meant to illustrate a spectrum of people and should not be overanalyzed for some deeper point.
* “Evil” in Ecclesiastes sometimes means exactly what we think it means. But it can also have a connotation of simple misery, which is, of course, an outworking of evil or the Evil One. Nonetheless, it would be overstating the issue to always point at misery and declare that the devil is at work.
* In 9:8, to be clothed in white indicates that we should have an appearance of joy.
* In chapter 9-10 we will once again see the theme of over-talking vs. quiet listening from back in ch. 5. There is wisdom in letting our words be few.
* There is no reason that the story that begins in 9:13 must be historical. It is probably a parable of sorts. However, it is reminiscent of Hezekiah’s stand against the Assyrians.
* The dead fly imagery in 10:1 is both graphic and interesting. Perfume was used to cover the smell of death, much less flies, so it’s difficult to say that the smell of a fly would overcome that of perfume. I think Provan’s understanding makes good sense – the word of a fool are scented in such a way that they are appealing, though they contain only death. Part of his reasoning is that “dead flies” is more literally “flies of death” might be an euphemism for death. Regardless, the meaning is clear in the second part of the verse.
* I had to choose to not fully tackle 10:8-9, 11. It seems like 8-9 talk about what we have seen already in Ecclesiastes – things will not always go as we hope. But it is interesting that v.8 and v.11 both talk of a snake. Looking at this section as a whole, it could be that the snake is a metaphor for the corrupt king that is in view throughout the chapter. This would definitely help make sense of verse 11, of charming the snake is analogous to dealing wisely with the king, as mentioned in v. 4.
* Verse 19 is also difficult. Based on what the Teacher said in previous chapters, he can’t mean that money is the most important thing in life in all situations. It seems to me, given the context of considering the efficacy and efficiency of government, he is insisting that money is needed to accomplish the tasks of rulers. This interpretation is supported by the mention of feasts and wine in connection with the servant who rose to leadership only to be ineffective. (vv. 16-18) Again, this is not to say that wealth is better – verses 9:13-18 cannot mean that. He simply means that everyone has their place in society, and though things will be broken, we are limited in our ability to rectify things. This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t work for justice or wisdom (see again the opening story), but we must use wisdom in doing so. In short, I think it is worth considering the fool in 10:12-15 who seems to want to coerce his way to the top. The argument of this section seems to be directed, at the very least, at such an effort. In other words, power and authority are not the way of the church. We follow the lead of Christ, which is foolishness to the world.