

**“THE CROOK IN THE LOT”**

After an extended consideration of the pitfalls that confront those who live their lives in the restless pursuit of wealth, possessions, or other things that they do not have, the Preacher now provides us with these words of counsel regarding to how to live a good life in this world of vanity. As I said when we began this series on Ecclesiastes, we could say that the Preacher’s aim in this book is to show us how to live “Your Best Life Now,” though his understanding of what constitutes the good life is very different than that which is offered in the bestselling book by that name. For the Preacher, the way to live a good life is to live a realistic life, a life that refuses to be taken in by sentimental denials of the way the world really is. And nowhere is this made any clearer than it is in the passage that is before us today. Here the Preacher tells us that the best way to live is to face up to the facts about life in this fallen world.

He begins in verses 1-4 by counseling us to face up to the realities of death, grief, and sadness. The house of mourning is better than the house of feasting. Sorrow is better than laughter. He even goes so far as to say that sadness is the way to make your heart glad. Now, we need to make sure that we are not misunderstanding him here. He does not mean that we should live in a perpetual state of gloom. As he said earlier, there is a time to weep and a time to laugh. There is nothing wrong with laughter and joy and happiness. What he is saying here is that the many sadnesses of life, especially the mourning that accompanies the deaths of those we love, cause us to reflect upon our own mortality. In the words of the Preacher: “[death] is the end of all mankind, and the living

will lay it to heart.” It is better for us to face up to the fact that our days on this earth will eventually come to an end than it is for us to live in a state of blissful denial. We are not going to live forever. This is something that we need to accept if we are going to prepare for our eventual departure from this world.

In the next string of sayings, contained in verses 5-6, the Preacher talks about the importance of heeding a rebuke from the wise. No one likes to be rebuked. It is a great blow to our pride to have someone tell us that something that we are doing is wrong. We would much rather have someone agree with us and affirm us, even when we are wrong. We would rather not be corrected. But, as the Preacher points out, this is the attitude of a fool. It is another denial of reality.

The next set of sayings generally revolves around the theme of patience. We can see the need for patience when we realize that the end of a thing is better than the beginning. We need to be patient, because we only get a full and complete picture of anything when we come to its end. This is especially true of the lives that we live in this world. We need to be patient because we do not have the full picture yet. And, as James Durham once put it, when the web of all of God’s providences for the church and for each of its members is stretched out so that its full length can be seen by all of the redeemed in heaven, “there will not then be found one misplaced thread, nor any wrong-set colour in it all.” [cited in Bridges, *Ecclesiastes*, Geneva Commentaries, 144]

The Preacher sets patience in contrast to three things: pride, anger, and, interestingly, a nostalgic longing for the past. We see this last contrast in the statement: “Say not:

‘Why were the former days better than these?’ For it is not from wisdom that you ask this.” Nostalgia is the refusal to bear patiently with the world as it presently is. In this sense, it is another way to live in denial of reality. It is unrealistic in two senses. On the one hand, it paints too rosy a picture of the past. And on the other hand, it causes us to avoid facing up to life in the present.

The next set of sayings, in verses 11-12, commends the life of wisdom to us. This sounds very much like what we read so often in the book of Proverbs. Do whatever you can to get wisdom. Wisdom shows you how to live realistically. It will protect you and preserve you as you make your way through this life of vanity under the sun.

Now, we have made our way through the first twelve verses of this passage fairly quickly. More could have been said on any number of the points that have been mentioned thus far. However, I want to use the remainder of this sermon to focus our attention upon the last two verses in this passage, verses 13-14. The Preacher has some hard things to say in these verses, and it is important that we take the time to reflect upon them. And as we do so, I think we will find that the overarching message of this passage will be driven home all the more clearly.

In verse 13, the Preacher calls us to consider the work of God. That in itself is not so hard. Many of God’s works are things that we enjoy considering. We can find great joy in reflecting upon God’s glorious handiwork in creation or his almighty power in his accomplishment of our redemption. But those are not the works that the Preacher is calling us to consider here. He wants us to reflect upon the fact that the crooked things in

our lives, the difficult and sad and disturbing things, the things that older authors referred to as the “crooks” in a person’s “lot,” these things are the work of God. This is another part of reality that we have to face up to. The crooked things in our lives are things of God’s making. Both the day of prosperity and the day of adversity come from the hand of the Lord.

This is something that many people, even professing Christians, find difficult to accept. Some will argue that the difficulties that we face in this life are strictly the result of the exercise of human free will or of so-called “chance” events. This is expressed in this quote from Gregory Boyd: “God must work with, and battle against, other created beings. While none of these beings can match God’s own power, each has some degree of genuine influence within the cosmos.” [cited in Derek Thomas, *What Is Providence?*, 16] The problem with this notion is that it is in direct conflict with any number of biblical texts, including the one that we are studying today. The Bible makes it clear that the Lord exercises his sovereign control over absolutely everything in this world, including calamitous events, so-called “chance” events, and the actions of sinful men. Consider this sampling of texts:

Joseph’s words to his brothers, who had sold him as a slave into Egypt: “And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God.” [Gen. 45:7-8a]

Job's response to his wife: "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil [disaster]?" [Job 2:10]

The Proverb that says: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." [Prov. 16:33]

The Lord's words through the prophet Isaiah: "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]

The prophet Jeremiah's rhetorical question: "Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?" [Lam. 3:38]

The biblical evidence is overwhelmingly clear: everything that takes place in this world happens because God wills it to happen in the precise way that it happens.

Now, it is true that there are secondary causes involved in this. Job's suffering was caused by Satan. Joseph's slavery was brought about by his brothers' murderous hatred. The Lord's sovereign control over the actions of his creatures does not absolve them of their responsibility for their actions. Nevertheless, God exercises his providence in such

a manner that secondary causes are always made to comply with his perfect will. C.S.

Lewis explains it this way in his book *Miracles*:

“In the play Hamlet, Ophelia climbs out on a branch overhanging a river: the branch breaks, she falls and drowns. What would you reply if someone asked, ‘Did Ophelia die because Shakespeare, for poetic reasons, wanted her to die at that moment - or because the branch broke?’ I think that one would have to say, ‘For both reasons.’ Every event in the play happens as a result of other events in the play, but also every event happens because the poet wants it to happen. All the events in the play are Shakespearean events; similarly, all events in the real world are providential events... ‘Providence’ and Natural causation are not alternatives; both determine every event because both are one.” [cited in Derek Thomas, *What Is Providence?*, 31-2]

The Lord works out his purposes through a wide variety of secondary causes, but the primary cause is always his holy and perfect will.

Another problem with denying that the Lord’s hand is behind the crooked things in our lives is that it leaves us without any real hope. There is no comfort in removing the sovereignty of God from our suffering. On the contrary, it leaves us with a god who may be well intentioned, but who lacks the ability to bring his good intentions about. This is why it is so important that we consider the crooks in our lot to be the work of God. We

need to accept this truth and meditate upon it, because this is the only way we will learn how to behave rightly under the trials that the Lord ordains for us in this life. And it is the only way we will be able to benefit from our trials, which is always God's purpose when he brings crooks into the lot of his children.

Thomas Boston, a 17<sup>th</sup> century Scottish minister, wrote a book in which he explored what the Preacher is talking about in verse 13, a book entitled *The Crook in the Lot*. Boston himself had to endure a number of painful crooks in his own lot, including the deaths of six children, the mental health struggles of his wife, and chronic health problems of his own. Boston does not deny the fact that there is much that is unknown to us when it comes to the purpose of our sufferings. We are often perplexed in the face of our trials. We do not understand what the Lord is doing. Nevertheless, God has not left us entirely in the dark on this matter. The Scriptures do reveal some of the reasons why the Lord brings suffering into the lives of his people. In *The Crook in the Lot*, Boston lists seven biblical reasons for why the Lord brings crooks into our lot. Listen now as I briefly set those seven reasons before us.

*First, the Lord uses the crooks in our lot to test the sincerity of our faith.* This is what we see in the book of Job. Satan accused God of bribing Job to trust him, and God responded by permitting Satan to bring great adversity into Job's life in order to prove that his faith was genuine, Spirit-worked faith. God uses our trials to test and refine our faith.

*Second, the crooks in our lot serve to wean us from this world.* They remind us, as we saw in last week's sermon, that this world is no place to find lasting rest. They cause us to long for the next life, life with God in heaven. As Samuel Rutherford wrote, "If contentment were here, heaven were not heaven." [*Letters*, 129]

*Third, the crooks in our lot are sometimes used by God to convict us of sin.* Sometimes, our trials come as a direct result of some sin that we have committed. And at other times, even though they may not be directly related to a particular sin, they can be used to cause us to see some aspect of our sinfulness, to humble us, and to lead us to repentance.

*Fourth, God sometimes uses crooks to correct us for our sin.* Because we are God's children, he disciplines us. He will not allow us to continue on a sinful path without correcting us. He uses our trials to discipline us and train us in the way of righteousness.

*Fifth, God can use crooks in our lot to prevent us from falling into sin.* He might use some weakness or limitation in order to keep you from the trappings of pride. He might withhold something from you in order to prevent you from thinking that you are independent of him. And there are countless other ways in which the Lord can use the crooks in our lot to keep us from sin.

*Sixth, the crooks in our lot can expose the latent corruption in our hearts.* When everything is going smoothly in our lives, some aspects of our sinfulness can lay dormant within us. But when adversity comes and stirs things up, our true nature comes forth. This is always very humbling for us, because we thought that we were much more mature

in the faith than we proved to be. And the Lord uses such times of humbling to guard us against pride and cause us to realize how much we owe to his mercy.

*And seventh, the Lord uses the crooks in our lot to evidence the reality and strength of his grace in our hearts.* Our crooks provide opportunities for God to display the power of his grace in our lives. God uses the crooks that he creates in the lives of his people to further our salvation and to manifest his glory. Boston sums this up in these words:

“The truth is, the crook in the lot is the great engine of Providence for making men appear in their true colors, discovering both their ill and their good. And if the grace of God is in them, it will bring it out and cause it to display itself...The crook in the lot gives rise to many acts of faith, hope, love, self-denial, resignation, and other graces, to many heavenly breathings, pantings, and groanings, which otherwise would not be brought forth.” [Thomas Boston, *The Crook in the Lot*, 31]

We are not going to understand everything about God’s reasons for making the crooks in our lot, but the Scriptures do provide us with some insight into this matter, and we should seek to apply this insight as we deal with the particular crooks that the Lord brings into our lives.

There is great comfort for God's children in knowing that the crooked things in our lives have been made that way by the hand of Almighty God. Here again is Thomas Boston:

“Whatever is the crook in your lot, it is God's making; and therefore you may look upon it kindly. Since it is your Father who has made it for you, question not but there is a favorable design in it towards you...He himself can make straight what He has made crooked, though none other can.” [Thomas Boston, *The Crook in the Lot*, 36, 37]

God does not call you to deny the pain and sorrow caused by the crooks in your lot. Nor does he call you to pretend that you understand precisely how all of these crooks are working together for your good. But he does call you to submit to his sovereign control over your life. And he calls you to trust him. In the words of John Collins, a professor of Old Testament at our denominational seminary:

“I...need to say ‘no’ to defiance, to all my efforts to extort an explanation from God...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.”