



***SHEPHERDING THROUGH HOSTILITY / PASTORAL REFLECTIONS ON ECCLESIASTES 7***  
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- There is a treasure in the book of Ecclesiastes (as in all of Scripture) for the human experience. And for the pastoral experience. Pastoral ministry frequently feels like a Sisyphian ordeal:

You get to the end of three months counseling someone, and they don't seem any further helped than they did when they first walked in. You may feel the lament of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes – "Meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless."

You may preach on unity and the bonds of peace on Sunday morning and then that very Sunday evening walk into a members meeting that feels like a scene from the old west and feel the lament of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes – "Vanity vanity, all is vanity."

You may get to the office on Monday morning, exhausted, stressed, bleary-eyed, ready to push that rock back up the hill – all that water you parted the previous day has rushed back into place – and you're staring at your email inbox and seeing your voicemail notifications and looking at that calendar of appointments for the week and that

blank sheet of paper where the next Sunday's sermon is supposed to be and think like the Teacher in Ecclesiastes, "It's like chasing the wind."

You may feel "all is meaningless." Especially when you are ministering in the midst of

- **Sisyphian:** This term for a task that is endless and ineffective comes straight out of Greek myth. In Greek legend Sisyphus was punished in Hades for his misdeeds in life by being condemned eternally to roll a heavy stone up a hill. As he neared the top, the stone rolled down again, so that his labour was everlasting and futile.

conflict, division, unfair or undue criticism, or even hostility. All your faithful preaching, your patient listening, your un-self-defensive absorption of personal slights and insinuations don't seem to earn you much credit. The more a martyr you're willing to be, the more they seem willing to make you one. No one is impressed by your passive acceptance of their insults and maneuvering against you.

Ecclesiastes 7 is of course not directly a text on pastoral ministry, much less enduring hostility in the midst of it, but I believe the Teacher has a word we can apply for you here. If you find yourself in the midst of a difficult season – or a difficult ministerial life in general – I want to share 4 words with you on shepherding in the midst of it.

## 1. Hostility is clarifying.

Now, I don't mean that the hostility itself is easy to understand. Sometimes the most confusing, confounding thing to understand in ministry is why people are so angry.

One thing you can't quite prepare for and that is profoundly hurtful as it is confusing is that you will have people in your church who just don't like you for apparently no reason. This is really one of the weirdest part of pastoral ministry and maybe the most unfortunate. When you're a pastor, you discover you disappoint some people just by being. You're not enough something for some, or you're too much of something else for others.

I always did my best to ask how or why I had offended someone or what had come between us, but some people can't give a reason (or won't). This was always frustrating. And when it resulted in hard treatment of my wife, it was angering. But I never could quite get used to pastoring people who could not or would not explain why they were rude, disruptive, or divisive. There can definitely be a lack of clarity in the hostility.

But the existence of it is clarifying -- about your role, your position. Hostility -- and difficulty, conflict, pain in general -- is clarifying about where you stand, about what you're there to do. Suffering is a kind of mineral spirits for the pastor, stripping away all the varnish of our self-sufficiency and our illusions about what pastoral ministry is, what we're for.

The Teacher writes in Ecclesiastes 7:1-4:

A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of one's death is better than the day of one's birth. It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, since that is the end of all mankind, and the living should take it to heart. Grief is better than laughter, for when a face is sad, a heart may be glad. The heart of the wise is in a house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in a house of pleasure.

What is the Teacher teaching us here? That there is a kind of clarity to the reality of the human situation -- death is serious, we fall short of glory, and suffering is a kind of irruption of the real in the midst of careless and thoughtlessly carefree living.

While I was reading Ecclesiastes to a dying

friend, another friend died of a brain tumor and I preached her funeral. I preached Ecclesiastes 7 -- "It is better to go to house of mourning." Why?

So much of what we angle for in terms of ministry success is a kind of fine perfume. It's good. It's valuable. It smells good. But even better is a "good name." An identity that holds fast when the scent wears off.

The day of birth, the day of smelling good, the day of feasting -- all good things. But you find out who you are in the days of death. It's clarifying to suffer these little deaths in ministry because you find out what you're in it for. You find out if you're really a pastor, actually, or just a guy who wants to be applauded.

And hostility clarifies where others stand, what they're in it for, as well. My two biggest critics in my ministry started out as two of my biggest fans. The hostility became clarifying about where their true interests lied. What they were really about. Hostility is clarifying.

## 2. Hostility is normal.

What the book of Ecclesiastes does for us is normalize lament. The book is a normalization of confusion, of weakness, of grief-stricken bewilderment. If you feel lost, hopeless, helpless, overwhelmed -- the Teacher is saying "You're normal."

Now, this isn't how God designed the world to work. It's not "normal" in the sense that he made the world good and mankind without sin. But given the fallenness that ensued, the sin in the heart of every man, woman, and child, the sheer relational dysfunction and cultural brokenness of the world, hostility is normal. We should be surprised when it doesn't happen.

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If we're going to do relationships in this broken world, we're going to face conflict. If we're going to do relationships in the context of the church -- a place where strangers don't just become friends but enemies become brothers and sisters, where the Devil wants to disrupt the entire enterprise -- we're going to have to go into that house of mourning time and time again. We need to lay this to heart -- the normal course of ministry is fraught with conflict.

I remember talking to one of the younger

guys in my ministry cohort a year or so ago. He was about 4 or 5 years into his pastorate. He said he was dealing with some really difficult things and so when we got on our call I asked him to describe the situation.

He said, "I inherited these deacons who've been doing things the same way for 30 years and they are really reluctant to make changes. They seem like they're listening to me but then they ignore what I suggest. There's this older guy in the church who's the patriarch of a big family with multiple members in the church, and he seems to have the most influence, and I've been told if I disappoint him, he could take them all out and we'd lose a lot of giving. And I have these ladies who run a few programs that are really outdated and nobody attends them except themselves and it's more of a fellowship for them than any kind of service to the church or the community, and I'm stressed on how to suggest discontinuing them. And there's a couple of guys who come up to me every Sunday after I preach to offer me pointers and little critiques."

I listened to all this, and I said, "Brother, you know what it sounds like?"

He said, "What?"

I said, "It sounds like you've got a church."

Now, that's totally normal. But even if you've got huge problems in your church, potential splits or division, know that's not God's design for the church, but in this sinful world, it's normal. You're not unique. You're not special. (Sorry Enneagram 4's.) Nobody's picking on you. You didn't end up in the one church in the world where incredibly awful things are said or done. You ended up in the crosshairs of the gospel and by contrast in the crosshairs of Satan. Just read the New Testament if you think hostility is out of the ordinary for the ministry of the church.

Don't say - (v.10) -- "Why were the former days better than these?" since it is not wise of you to ask this.

Wisdom comes in knowing hostility is normal. In fact, hostility is due the minister of the gospel. If you preach the gospel, you will stir some things up. The same sun that melts the ice hardens the clay. The Good Shepherd promised: "In this world you will have trouble."

The pastor the Lord entrusted his flock to says, "Dear friends, don't be surprised when the fiery ordeal comes among you to test you as if

something unusual were happening to you."

Don't let hostility push you into self-pity. Don't let it push you into bitterness. Peter says "Instead, rejoice as you share in the sufferings of Christ" (1 Pet. 4:12-13)

### 3. Hostility pushes us into God.

Or it can. It should.

The closer to God we get, the more wisdom we attain, wisdom beyond ministerial technology, best practices, pastoral strategies. Real knowledge of God which leads to real godliness, which is wisdom - treasure in the midst of poverty.

The Teacher writes in verses 8-12:

The end of a matter is better than its beginning; a patient spirit is better than a proud spirit. Don't let your spirit rush to be angry, for anger abides in the heart of fools. Don't say, "Why were the former days better than these?" since it is not wise of you to ask this. Wisdom is as good as an inheritance and an advantage to those who see the sun, because wisdom is protection as silver is protection; but the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of its owner.

Character, pastors, is better than success. And wisdom is better than know-how.

What does this wisdom look like?

Well, it looks first like learning the compassion our Shepherd has for others who have suffered in the same ways.

Serve people better through your wounds. The suffering of hostility makes you a better pastor to those who have been hurt. It's hard to shepherd biblically with a swagger. But with a limp? You become a blessing to the sheep in ways you and they never imagined.

The wisdom that comes from the experience of hostility also helps you discern the difference between the patient spirit (v.8) and the rush to anger (v.9). How do you know when to stick up for yourself and how do you know when to suffer conflict without defense?

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul says to the church embroiled in retribution against one another "Why not rather be wronged?" But elsewhere he confronts Peter to his face, he names the names of divisive people, he calls the Galatians foolish.

When hostility pushes us into God it ushers

us into the wisdom of knowing when we're only seeking personal retribution or if the gospel and the safety of the flock are at stake. I remember once talking to Ray Ortlund about a sticky discipline-type situation. "How do you know what to do here?" I asked.

He said, "You know, sometimes you have to protect someone from the church. And sometimes you have to protect the church from someone."

Wisdom is knowing the difference. Is the conflict simply something you've taken offense to? An inter-relational difference? Or does it compromise the gospel, the mission, the integrity of the church?

Sometimes protecting someone from the church, or the church from someone, puts us in the position of taking the heat. And this is, in God's long-range plan for us, good. The potential of having our reputation tarnished, brothers, puts us in the position of Christ.

Philip Ryken in his commentary on this passage, particularly commenting on vv. 2-3, says "Dealing with death, in all its sorrow, makes us better people." More than making us better people, however, it conforms us more to the image of the greatest Person – Christ.

Hostility can push us into the likeness of Christ, for he was not above it. He suffered it. He was tempted in it.

Jesus knows what it's like to have those Pharisees in the foyer trying to trap him in his words. He knows what it's like to have those Sadducees in the sanctuary conspiring against him. He knows what it's like to have those foes in the fellowship hall jealous about his influence. He knows what it's like to have the crowd that cheered turn on a dime to jeer.

Jesus knows what it's like to have well-meaning co-leaders object to his vision, misunderstand him. He knows what it's like to have friends who abandon him, who sleep while he agonizes. He knows what it's like to have passive fellow pastors willing to let him take all the hits while they watch from the safety of the shadows.

He was willing to be tempted as we are. He was willing to suffer. He endured more heat than you and I could ever or will ever take. Jesus walked straight into the hostility of the cross. For you.

Hostility is part of God's plan to make you more reliant on him and to make you more like Jesus.

In that regard, hostility is normal – meaning, it is not an aberration.

#### **4. Hostility is governed by God.**

The Teacher writes in verses 13-14:

Consider the work of God, for who can straighten out what he has made crooked?

In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity, consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that no one can discover anything that will come after him.

Brother, the Lord made you for this.

You can trust that he's not above your pain now because he wasn't above it then. He walks with you. He walked before you. He is above it now only as the sovereign Lord who governs it for your good.

You can have all the confidence this affords. You might not have seen it coming, but he did. Nothing catches him off guard. You may not know what they're saying behind your back, but he sees it all. And he is handling it.

His governance is for your good.

So what do you do with this?

You remind yourself – and if necessary, your church – that you are not an employee. You are a pastor. And the Lord in his wisdom has stewarded this situation to you. In his wisdom he decided this difficulty was tailor-made for you. For your leadership. For your gifts. For your disposition. For your responsibility. Not to prove your greatness, but to prove his.

In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity, consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that no one can discover anything that will come after him.

You don't know what tomorrow holds. But you know he holds tomorrow. So you can shepherd joyfully, compassionately, wisely, confidently, directly, and graciously.

You can do all things through the one who strengthens you.