

The limits of wisdom

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[0 : 00] Now, if you have your Bibles, perhaps you can open them again at Ecclesiastes chapter 8, a chapter that helps us to think about the limits of wisdom. Our question this evening is, how to live wisely, how do we live wisely in a world that is unstable and unpredictable?

I think it's a very helpful chapter for us. It speaks to those of us who have ever acted unwisely. Perhaps we have talked back to a teacher and got ourselves into trouble, or we've spoken with our colleagues about our boss not realizing they were right behind us. Perhaps we've said, well, everyone else is doing it, and so we decide to do something we shouldn't, but we're the ones that get caught. Or when you've jumped in with words and actions before stopping to think, is this really the right time? A preacher can help us to recognize there is value in wisdom. But it's also a chapter that's really helpful if we've ever found ourselves thinking, well, if I just have wisdom and enough wisdom, then I've found the key to life and I can expect life to go smoothly. Maybe some of us have thought that and discovered the hard way that life comes with no guarantees. Life is unstable and unpredictable. Whether it's the people in our lives, whether it's the events and circumstances of life, there is always something or someone with the potential to turn things upside down.

So Ecclesiastes chapter 8 is wisdom, and it's wisdom for real life. Our preacher is going to say to us, absolutely, wisdom is good, but we need to recognize that the best of wisdom has limits in the twists and turns of life. So we're going to see three guiding principles to move us through this chapter. One, that wisdom has value. Secondly, that wisdom has limits.

But then as we finish, to recognize that wisdom is still to be chosen. This is God's wisdom. Principle one, wisdom has value. Look at chapter 8, verse 1. Who is like the wise? Who knows the explanation of things? A person's wisdom brightens their face and changes its hard appearance. In chapter 7, there were lots of better than statements. And in one of those, it said, wisdom is better than money. It's a better defense. It's a better security. It is something that is lasting. So we find our preachers very positive about wisdom, living God's way, which makes sense.

[3 : 09] God is our creator. So living by the maker's guidelines and instructions is wise and good. In verse 1, it's good for our understanding. Wisdom is a way of interpreting. It's a good thing to have wisdom to understand and interpret the events and the situations and the emotions that we experience day by day. There's benefit in that. Perhaps to illustrate, the world probably divides into lots of different ways. But one way that we divide is into those who can read maps and those who can't read maps. It's a bit different now that there's Google Maps. But if you go back in time, remember those days when you had to navigate a new city or you had to go on holiday? Some people read well, some people don't.

Well, wisdom is like having that security and confidence. I can read the map. I can read the map of life. I can navigate by God's wisdom. So wisdom is good for understanding. It's also good for our happiness and our joy. That's why it says a person's wisdom brightens their face. It's like that aha moment, that moment of clarity. Things come clear. We find meaning. We find a good way forward. Wisdom is positive. Now, of course, we would expect the preacher to say that. After all, this is an Old Testament wisdom book. So wisdom, of course, is going to be better than folly. But he doesn't stop there.

Remember, he's taking us on this journey through life under the sun, and he's going to show us not just that wisdom has value, but also that wisdom has limits. We go to the end of the chapter, verses 16 and 17. We hear a different tone. When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe the labor that's done on earth, people getting no sleep day or night, then I saw all that God has done. And so on. Then the end of the verse, end of the chapter, even if the wise claim they know, they cannot really comprehend it. Life isn't black and white. And so the preacher is applying his mind to consider, what do we do when the rules just simply don't work out, when life doesn't go to plan?

And so he is applying his mind. He's trying to figure life out. It gives him no sleep. And he's aware of all the things that cause sleeplessness in our lives. Maybe losing sleep because of anxiety, or stress, or fear. And as he applies his mind, he understands that wisdom has limits. It will not give us the key to life in and of itself. Why? Because God is in control. He sees that God is the ultimate actor. Just as he said in chapter 7, God acts, and we can't turn back those actions. If God makes a thing crooked, we cannot make it straight. He says we cannot fully comprehend all that God is doing in the world. Perhaps we've wrestled with that reality that God is God, and we are not. And we can struggle with that, and we will never come to discover the meaning of all that God is doing. In fact, you'll finish by saying, if you hear someone who claims, well, I have wisdom. I figured life out.

[6 : 58] They're wrong, because you can't. So wisdom is good. It has value. That's how he introduces the topic. Wisdom has limits. It's how he closes the topic, because of the world in which we live.

We live in an unstable and unpredictable world. And so what happens in the middle of our chapter is he shows us three areas of life that impose limits on wisdom. And the first limit comes from authority.

So verses 2 to 5, you find him considering authority by focusing on the king, who of course in the Old Testament was the ultimate authority figure. For our purpose, we can substitute that for any authority figure over us, whether that's our employer, our teacher, our government officials, our parents.

There is authority established. And what does the preacher teach us about authority? Well, he says in verse 2, very simply, we should obey. Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God. Obey to keep the promise. Obeying the people in authority over us is one way of outworking the Ten Commandments. Obey to honor our father and mother by extension to honor those in authority.

In the New Testament, Peter says to us, show proper respect to everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor. So Old Testament, New Testament, we should honor those who are in authority.

[8 : 47] In verse 3 and verse 4, he says you should keep close to those in authority. Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Now perhaps, you know, showing loyalty to the king. Why?

He says because the king is so powerful, he can do whatever he pleases. You should stick close to the king because his word is powerful and it is foolish to resist.

There's a proverb in verse 5, whoever obeys his command will come to no harm and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. There is wisdom in knowing how to relate well to those in authority and to be guided by wisdom and how we do that. But there's an implied limit to wisdom. And it's this, and he's already spoken to us of this in chapter 5, authority figures don't always act justly. Authority figures can be unjust, cruel, and self-serving. Chapter 5, verse 9.

After talking about the poor being oppressed by high-up officials, in verse 9 it says, the increase from the land is taken by all the king himself, profits from the fields.

[10 : 17] So even as the believer in the Lord Jesus looks to live wisely in this world, it won't always save us from knowing injustice in an unstable, unpredictable world, especially as we understand that our control is limited and there are authority figures over us. Maybe we know this if we've had experience of serving under a bad boss. Maybe we know this by experience as the tired parent who has lost the plot and acted unjustly to our children. There is a limit implied that wisdom won't shield us from bad authority.

So that's one area of life in which there are limits to wisdom. The second area of life, verses 6 to 8, is to do with the times of our lives. And we've met this idea before.

In chapter 7, verse 13 and 14, consider what God has done who can straighten what he has made crooked. When times are good, be happy. But when times are bad, consider this. God has made the one as well as the other. Therefore, no one can discover anything about their future. So our preacher will keep reminding us of this, that our times are in God's hands and often that creates limits to wisdom. Verse 6 has a twist on the proverb that we were just introduced to in verse 5, that there is a right way, there's a proper time, there's a proper procedure, but that right way may see us weighed down by misery. It may lead to us experiencing difficulty and trouble. The preacher reminds us in verse 7, no one knows the future. So we can't predict and we can't plan with certainty. We all plan, but we have to know that those plans may not come to fulfilment. And to help us to see

that, in verse 8, he uses the image of the wind. As no one has power over the wind to contain it, so no one has power over the time of their death. The wind is a force that can be dangerous. The wind is a force that is out of our control. Some of us know this well. You know hurricanes and typhoons or west coast storms. Well, the preacher says in the same way, you and I, we have no control over the day of our death. We have no control over war and peace. And we have no control over the grip of wickedness that we see in lives and in societies. And so the limit that he points to is this.

God's wisdom does not guarantee the good life. We cannot get to the bottom of God's working. And so there is always the possibility of our life being turned upside down. I think this is a reminder of the deceit of the prosperity gospel. It says, follow Jesus and health and wealth will be yours. Only good things will come your way. It's a reminder of that simplistic, here are seven steps to improve your life. There are always limits and uncertainties. We've thought before about Jesus' teaching. Remember his parable about the man who had a good crop and who decided that he would build bigger barns. He would store up for himself. He would eat, drink, and be merry. And he was called a fool. He didn't understand that he didn't have control over his life and he didn't understand that he needed to be right with his

God. There's a third area of life where wisdom's limits confront us. And it's as we see the injustice that takes place in the world, which tragically shows itself in so many different ways as the preacher begins to outline for us. So in verse 9, what do we see there? There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt and to the hurt of others. Don't we see corrupt rule? Don't we see the abuse of power?

[15 : 21] We see people hurting others to benefit themselves. Whether we're thinking about a coup in Niger, whether we're thinking about people traffickers and the tragedies happening in our seas, whether we have experience of the boss who acts as a slave driver. There are those who will use power and abuse power. He looks at a different aspect in verse 10, the celebration of wickedness in a community or a society. Then too I saw the wicked buried, those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. Here is a society that has rejected biblical wisdom that praises somebody who lives a wicked life for sure, perhaps, turning up to worship, but their wicked lives. But their wicked lives are known. The celebration of wickedness when what is wrong earns people's praise, when it earns the applause of a society. Whether that's the ruthless businessman who's approved of because he is making it in the world, whether that's art that pushes the boundaries of morality and is praised, wisdom cannot shield us from these kind of things. Verse 11 and 12, he moves on to think about the limit of wisdom in the face of slow justice and no justice.

In verse 11, when the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, what happens? People's hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong. And we know this, don't we? There are times when people don't get what they deserve. There are times when it seems like in this world crime does pay, when laws are broken with no consequence, with the effect of the spreading of evil in people's hearts. Well, everybody else seems to be cheating the system and getting away with it, so why don't I? Unethical policies don't seem to disadvantage a business, so why don't we pursue that too? Verse 14 takes us perhaps to the greatest injustice that many of us wrestle with, maybe the most painful question. There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth. The righteous who get what the wicked deserve and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve. To ask the question, why do good things happen to bad people and why do bad things happen to bad people? Takes us to the voice of our preacher?

And it can lead people to lament. You know, why bother being righteous? Why bother being obedient, looking to live by God's wisdom when my life turns out this way? I'm trying to follow God's wisdom.

I expect things will look better than they are. And so the preacher wants us to see this limit that despite choosing wisdom, life can still be heartbreaking and we can still find ourselves being stepped on.

This preacher is a gift to us, I think, because he confronts life with honesty. He doesn't settle for easy answers. He prompts us to think deeply.

[19 : 22] And I'm sure as we think along with the preacher that we can recognize these same limits. We can have that sense of vanity, that sense of life just being crooked and not right.

And as we recognize that, we're all going to be, whether we're doing it deliberately or subconsciously, we're going to be choosing a response to God's wisdom in light of what we see in

our world and in our lives.

Maybe it's the response of frustration. I expected more from God's wisdom. I expected life would work out better as I try to live by God's wisdom.

Perhaps there's a sense of relief. Well, it's all too hard to figure out anyway, so let me not even bother applying my mind. For some people in the modern world, there's simply a rejection of this idea that wisdom has limits.

not for so many. All we need is a little bit more education. We can fix this. We can figure it out. We can make sense of life. We can end all that seems to be crooked.

[20 : 38] How should we choose to respond as we recognize that wisdom has limits in an unstable world? Well, what our preacher wants us to do, what God wants us to do, is to trust.

That even still, God is on the throne. That God understands. That God will work all things together for good in the end.

And that in Jesus, there is wisdom and there is life. And we should hold on to him as we face the limits and the instability of the world.

So that takes us to our final point. And it says that even still, even knowing there are limits, we should choose the way of wisdom.

wisdom. So having established these brackets that wisdom is good and wisdom comes with limits, let's look for his positive instruction because there is positive instruction in here that we should still choose wisdom as the better way to live.

[21 : 56] There are two different perspectives to help us to think about that. First of all, in verses 12 and 13, to consider the future. As we wonder, is it worth it to keep following God and his wisdom in the face of all the wickedness and injustice we see?

Verse 12 and 13, Although a wicked person who commits a hundred crimes may live a long time, exaggeration to show seeming prosperity, I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him.

Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them. In the face of the instability that we see, we need to learn to look to the future and to the God who holds the present and the future in his hands and to understand that in the end, the judge of all the earth will do right.

That God's perfect, righteous justice will be exercised. One of the more helpful theologians on this topic is a chap called Miroslav Volf.

He's a Croat and he lived through the Balkan Wars and so he has a lot of reflection on war and cycles of revenge and hatred.

[23 : 28] And so he finds himself thinking, what is the only way out of that cycle that gripped the Balkans in the 90s of violence and revenge? And for him as a Christian, he came to the conclusion the only thing, the only way to escape it gripping our hearts is to trust in the justice of God.

To leave justice in God's hands. To learn to trust in ultimate justice even in the face of so much injustice in the present.

And that makes sense especially in light of the New Testament and especially in light of Jesus' teaching. so much of Jesus' teaching focuses on that great reversal that takes place in the end.

Maybe we remember the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man was living it up. The poor man Lazarus was laying at his gates. Dogs were licking his wounds.

The rich man offered no help. Well, when they die, there's a great reversal. It's the rich man who's in torment and it's Lazarus who's in glory.

[24 : 43] Or the parable of the sheep and the goats and Jesus the judge. And in the end there is reward for those who live by God's wisdom.

In the end justice is done. And so we trust in the God of justice. Especially in light of the gospel.

We remember that Jesus on the cross has taken the judgment that we deserve. And by faith in him we live knowing that our verdict, God's verdict on our lives is already in.

That we are not condemned. That we will be welcomed into glory. And so with Paul in Romans 8 and verse 18 we are able to say as those who trust in Jesus our present sufferings, the injustices, troubles of life are not worth comparing with glory to be revealed in us.

But we need to live in light of eternity to have that perspective. so that we would still choose the way of God's wisdom to live in faith and obedience in an unpredictable world.

[26 : 06] So we need to consider the future but he also says that we need to consider how we live in the present. Verse 15 we've heard him say this before so I commend the enjoyment of life

because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun.

He comes back to this so often in the face of all the difficulties all the apparent meaninglessness of life what do we choose? We choose to enjoy God and we choose to feast we choose to enjoy his everyday gifts and goodnesses and when we choose that when we choose contentment and joy in God and from God the preacher says that even those dark clouds of troubles will not completely block out the sunshine of God's love and God's goodness towards us so we recognize that there are limits and there is injustice but we also recognize that God is good and generous and we make sure to enjoy and to especially enjoy the greatest gift who of course is Jesus who is a source of eternal joy for his people unlike the kings that we meet in Ecclesiastes the kings that we meet in our day those in authority

Jesus is the king we can trust completely he is never unpredictable he is never unfaithful we should obey stick closely to him and love and honor him in light of all the uncertainty about the times of our lives we are invited to trust in Jesus the Lord who gives us the promise of hope in life and in death and as we recognize that there is so much injustice we place ourselves in the hands of Jesus the judge who judges justly the one who suffered the just for the unjust to bring us to God so Ecclesiastes chapter 8 is wisdom for real life it recognizes how often life can be unsettling but even as that is true still he insists that choosing God's way of wisdom still makes best sense choosing to follow Jesus who is the wisdom of

God for us is still the best way to live that we would choose to walk with him today even as we'll sing in a moment even if we find ourselves walking in the valley that we would look to him as the ultimate hope and security for our lives so let's pray about that now let's pray Lord our God we recognize and confess that you established this world and it was very good but we can see so clearly the effect of sin in this world we recognize and acknowledge along with the preacher the brokenness the injustice the sorrow the confusion that can so often reign in our lives and seems to reign in our world

Lord as we come to an end of ourselves where even as we seek to be faithful we find our plans thwarted we find ourselves disappointed and we live with fear Lord help us to keep on trusting in your way of wisdom for our lives help us to put our trust in Jesus our wise our good our gracious our just Lord and King so that we might enjoy everyday life recognizing your generosity towards us and we might also have hope as we consider our death and eternal realities so please help us that by your spirit you would keep applying your truth to our hearts and our lives that you would guide us in all wisdom we pray in

[30 : 53] Jesus name Amen so let's close by singing the hymn that we've been learning over the last few weeks in the valley bless the Lord and we can stand again as we're able to sing together when the path that I feared is the way he has said and I long to