

(3) Wisdom and folly

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Date: 06 July 2008

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] The reading's taken from Ecclesiastes chapter 8, verse 10, to chapter 9, verse 16, and you can find that at page 672 of the Bibles in front of you.

Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place, and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.

Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous.

I said that this also is vanity. And I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

[1 : 25] When I applied my heart to know wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes sleep, then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun.

However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God.

Whether it is love or hate, man does not know both are before him. It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not.

As is the good, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all.

Also the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

[2 : 44] For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.

Go, eat your bread in joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments always be white, let oil not be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life, and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, where you are going. 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 favour to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.

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.

I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siege works against it.

[4 : 17] But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he, by his wisdom, delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard.

Ravi, thanks very much indeed for reading for us. Please keep Ecclesiastes open on page 672. This is the third in a series of four talks on Ecclesiastes.

As we sit, let's pray together. The writer of the Hebrews tells us of Jesus, he is the radiance of the glory of God, and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.

Heavenly Father, we praise you for this glorious truth that we've been thinking about, that the Lord Jesus is king in this world. Thank you for his powerful word, and we pray that as we come to it now, that you give us ears to hear, to understand, that you transform us as we seek to live in this world. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Now, when it comes to holidays, I am a planner.

[5 : 37] I don't like nasty surprises. I want to know exactly what the place we are going to stay in is like. What the view will be like. What there is to do.

What there is to see. How much driving around will be. You know, to get to the beach and to do all the things we want to do. I don't want to arrive and discover that the place where it's staying in for the next fortnight is too small.

That it's dirty. That it's miles from anywhere. And it's next door to a building site. I'm a planner. Because I don't want to be disappointed. And Ecclesiastes is written, in a sense, so that we won't be disappointed with life.

Now, many of us have begun to see that over the last couple of weeks. Do listen to the talks on the web if you've missed them. It's a book containing the words of King Solomon, either written by Solomon himself or by someone else expressing Solomon's thoughts.

He calls himself the teacher or the preacher. And he addresses life as it really is. It's a funny thing, isn't it? In the popular imagination, the world of the Bible is miles away from real life.

[6 : 49] Our culture assumes that Christians kind of live in a fairy tale world. Yet when we actually engage with the Bible, we discover its earthy realism.

How very refreshing it is. In fact, a number of people have said to me just over the last couple of weeks that the teacher describes precisely the world in which they live. A world that is vanity, purposeless, and meaningless.

Now, I'm conscious that perhaps if you're in the youth group or in your 20s, that life won't necessarily seem like that at the moment, as you see all the sort of possibilities of life stretching out for miles ahead of you.

But remember, the teacher writes from the other end of life. And it's part of the kindness of God that he gives us this book so that we won't spend our whole lives investing ourselves in things which actually we'll only discover at the end of life we're meaningless and vanity.

As someone who will remain nameless said to me last week when I was in my 20s, I wouldn't have been able to see what Ecclesiastes is on about. But 25 years on, it's only far too obvious.

[7 : 59] And the issue today is what should I expect life to be like in a world of vanity? What should I expect the life I experience to be like?

Well, the answer, if you turn to the back of the service sheet and to the sermon outline there, unfair. The world is an unfair place.

We saw two weeks ago, didn't we, how the whole world has been frustrated and subject to sin in every possible way. Every aspect of life has been subjected to frustration.

Which means that as I experience life, the life I experience in this world will be unfair. And until Jesus returns, until he ushers in his new creation, life will always be unfair.

which of course is why Ecclesiastes is so relevant. Because all of us need to understand, don't we, the world in which we live. Mark Williams, as he grows up, not that he's listening to this talk, but perhaps he will do in due course, as he grows up, he'll need to understand the world he is living in.

[9 : 09] Those of us who are following Jesus, why we need to understand the world that God has put us in. And those of us here this morning who are not followers of Jesus Christ, why we too need to come face to face with reality.

So then first of all, the world is an unfair place. First of all, because of injustice, verses 8 to 10. Have a look at chapter 8, verse 10.

Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. Here we see the wicked who are praised in life and honoured in death.

During their lives, they pass themselves off as respectable members of the community, religious even, and in their death, they are honoured. It's simply unfair.

Just before we moved to Dulwich from the East End five years ago, Ronnie Cray died. I remember it very clearly because despite the terror that he and his brother had inflicted on the community of East London in the 1960s, he was buried as a hero.

[10:22] The pavements were packed with crowds as his hearse was carried, his coffin was carried through the streets of Bethnal Green on a hearse. It's extraordinary.

And how is he being described? Oh, he's just a bit of a rogue. It's extraordinary, isn't it? You could describe someone like that. It's the kind of language you'd use to describe a naughty schoolboy rather than someone who'd inflicted the suffering that he and his brother had inflicted in the East End.

Life is unjust. People so quick to forget the terror which he had inflicted. What's more? Chapter 8, verse 11. Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.

Justice delayed is justice denied. It only encourages further wrongdoing. Or verse 14. There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous.

I said that this also is vanity. It's not fair. It's unjust. Why isn't there someone who is tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime?

[11:41] The world is far removed, isn't it, from the world of James Bond, where on the whole, baddies do badly and get caught. In the real world, baddies do well.

So the world is an unfair place because of injustice. Secondly, it's an unfair place because of death, chapters, chapter 9, verses 1 to 10. Now we began to see something of this last week, but the point here in chapter 9 about death is that the same event happens to everyone.

So have a look at verse 2. It's the same for all since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice.

As is the good, so is the sinner. And he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. It's the very fairness of death that it comes to all regardless of the kind of life they have lived that makes it so unfair.

Life is indiscriminate. Death is indiscriminate. It hits everyone equally. Which is what, of course, leads to the bitter pessimism of verses 4 and 5.

[12:57] Better to be a living dog than a dead lion. Not a cuddly Labrador, but a dirty, mangy, scavenger dog.

Whereas, of course, the lion is the most noble of beasts. What is his point? Well, better a living dog than a dead lion, yes. Life may be preferred to death.

But it's a pretty miserable existence. It's the life of a dog. What's more, verse 12, none of us know when death will come. 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 in an evil time when it suddenly falls upon them. Like a fish, one moment you can be swimming along, blissfully enjoying life.

The next moment, death has you in its net as you face an endless round of chemotherapy. Death makes the world an unfair place.

[14:01] Last time, there were some friends of ours, a wonderful godly couple with their two young boys who were on holiday driving back from seeing friends. They had served in a number of local churches. They were extraordinarily gifted.

They were involved in a car crash that killed him outright. It left her in hospital for months, the two boys being cared for by grandparents. Now, of course, we know that those kinds of things happen. But why should it happen to a Christian family with years ahead of them of fruitful gospel service? Why, verse 2, does death strike the righteous in the same way as the wicked?

The world is an unfair place because of injustice, because of death, thirdly, because of chance, chapter 9, verses 11 to 18.

You see, look at chapter 9, 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 intelligence, nor favour to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.

[15:07] This is what life is like in the topsy-turvy world in which we live. Life is simply not the way it should be. On Thursday morning, Andy Murray acknowledged on the radio that having been beaten by Rafael Nadal at Wimbledon, he had been beaten by the better player.

But, of course, so often life is not like that. The race is not to the swift, nor riches to the intelligent. The colleague who's promoted, not because they are better qualified or because they're the best or the right person for the job, but simply because they know the right people, or perhaps because they're a bully.

Or look at the parable in verses 14 and 15. There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siege works against it.

But there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. In fact, verse 16, his wisdom is despised.

It's unfair. It's unjust. There was a discussion in the Sunday Telegraph a couple of years ago about our obsession with health and our whole desire of our culture to try and prolong our lifespans.

[16:32] But the article noted that the trouble with such ambition is that a major determinant of how long we live is luck and chance. And the point was illustrated with the story of a lucky Dutchman in the Second World War.

He and two others had ambushed a German car and shot two SS officers. The next morning, German troops came to search for them with tracker dogs and they fled into the long grass of the nearby fields.

The Germans moved through the fields in a systematic grid and killed his two companions at which point the Dutchman recounts how the German soldiers came back to look for him in the grass where he was hiding.

This is what he says. One of them moved straight towards me. I was getting ready to kill him when he muttered stay still, don't move, I didn't see you. I put my pistol down.

I watched his back disappear as he shouted, all clear. We got all of them. And how does the article finish? It shows that in the end we can't control our own destiny.

[17:41] Luck will always play its part. Injustice, death, chance, all of them conspire together to make life unfair.

You see, it's very easy, isn't it, to have what we might call a slot machine view of God. It would be very easy to think that in Solomon's day. If you keep the covenant, you'll be blessed.

If you don't, you'll be cursed. It's one of the things we've been thinking about in our Bible overview over the last year or so. Or Psalm 1, which the children have been learning in Sunday school.

Blessed is the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and so on.

And it's true that when Jesus returns, there'll be wonderful blessing in the new creation for his people. And there are great joys now of living for Jesus Christ.

But it is not the whole story, because we live in a fallen world. Yet deep down, don't we think that Christians should do well?

[18:44] That God should make me prosper in this life? It's what we see in the false teaching of the prosperity gospel, which says, become a Christian or life will be successful.

You'll be healthy, wealthy, your problems will disappear. And I guess we're not immune to thinking that ourselves from time to time. Deep down, don't we think that the children of godly parents should turn out well and follow Jesus?

But of course, the fact is that bad parents produce children who are keen missionaries, and good parents produce children who turn their backs on Jesus. The slick answers of simplistic religion simply don't work.

You can't tell those who are Christians by the badges on the bonnets of their cars or by the amount of money they earn or by the things that happen to them in this life. There are loads of Christians who are unemployed, whose family situations are a total nightmare, whose health packs up in their 50s.

It's really important that we grasp the way the world is. Otherwise, of course, when life, when we experience the unfairness of life, either we all blame God, why is this happening to me, perhaps God doesn't love me after all, or we'll simply pretend that life is fine when it isn't, when we are aching inside and when life is painful.

[20 : 09] I guess that's a particular danger for a church like Grace Church in a largely middle-class area because, of course, middle-class culture always has to pretend that life is fine when it isn't.

Well, wonderfully, the Bible liberates us from that. The world is an unfair place. The teacher helps us to be realistic about what it is like to live in a fallen world where every aspect of our lives is affected by sin.

So then, secondly, how should I live in an unfair world? Well, first of all, in a world of death, enjoy life.

Chapter 8, verse 15. We began to see this last week, didn't we? It's one of the repeated echoes of the book. Enjoy life. So, chapter 8, verse 15. And I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

Enjoy what God has given you. Or chapter 9, verse 7. Go, eat your bread in joy and drink your wine with a merry heart for God has already approved what you do.

[21 : 24] Or verse 8. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. In a hot climate, white keeps you cool. In a dry climate, oil stops your skin drying out.

These aren't just necessities he's talking about, they're luxuries. Go out for that meal. Buy those new clades. Enjoy that holiday. Verse 9, enjoy life with your wife if you have one.

Verse 10, work hard. It's a good thing to do. As we said last week, none of these things stop life being vanity. None of them in themselves have purpose and meaning.

But nonetheless, enjoy them as God's good gifts. It's very down to earth, isn't it? We won't find satisfaction, meaning and purpose in these things, but enjoy the gifts that God has given us.

After all, plenty of people don't have them. In a world of death, enjoy life. Don't feel guilty about what God has given you. Yes, of course, we're to heed what the Bible says elsewhere.

[22 : 26] We're to give generously, sacrificially, cheerfully. We're to give to the work of the Lord, but enjoy life where you can and don't feel guilty about what God has given you.

In a world of death, enjoy life. Secondly, in a world of chance, know that God is in charge because God's sovereignty, which we've been thinking about this morning already, the fact that God is in charge of his whole world is one of the overarching ideas of this whole book.

We saw back in chapter 1, verse 13, that it's God who's made the world as it is. It is God who has subjected the world to vanity and to frustration. And in the same way, we see again and again in these two chapters that God is in charge of our lives.

So chapter 8, verse 15, I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him.

under the sun. It is God who gives us the circumstances of life. Or look on to verse 17 where there's a contrast between the work of God, in other words, the God who understands the world he's made and mankind who cannot understand it.

[23 : 46] Or chapter 9, verse 1, but all this I laid to heart examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. our lives are in God's hands.

And surely the point is that when we are experiencing the moral outrage of the teacher as we look at our unfair world, when we're experiencing the injustice of the world, when we're feeling the brutal honesty of the fact that death is so indiscriminate, when our lives seem to be the products of chance more than anything else, the point is that we need to know that God is in charge and to trust him.

Now, that doesn't mean there will be easy answers. It doesn't mean we can evade the harsh realities of life in a fallen world. It doesn't mean that our lives in this world will be full of happy endings.

But it does mean that Christians can be confident that God is in charge and will keep his promises. thirdly, in a world of injustice, remember that God will judge.

Chapter 8, verses 12 and 13. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God because they fear before him.

[25 : 11] But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow because he does not fear before God. Now, we'll just spend a little bit of time on this because we'll be looking at much more of it next week at the end of the book.

And at first, verses 12 and 13, the teacher seems to contradict himself, doesn't he? Verse 12, as he says that the sinner, the unbeliever, as we would say, the person who isn't following Jesus, does prolong his life.

But verse 13, he doesn't prolong his life. So what's going on there? Well, surely both are true. At one level, those who don't trust in Jesus do flourish.

They retire well, they live long just as much as anyone else, or not. But at another level, they don't. Because in the second half of verse 12, the teacher begins to talk about life beyond the grave.

Those who fear God, in other words, those who are in right relationship with him, in Jesus Christ, might be well with them. But verse 13, that won't be the case for those who don't fear God, for those who haven't bowed the knees of Jesus Christ as their king.

[26 : 22] In a world of injustice, remember God will judge fairly and rightly. The world is an unfair place. And God wants us to know how to live in an unfair world.

In a world of death, enjoy life. In a world of chance, know that God is in charge. In a world of injustice, know that God will judge. You see, Jesus calls us to live by sight as well as by faith. We are to live by sight, fully aware, eyes wide open to what the world is like, to what a fallen world is like, even as a follower of Jesus Christ.

But we are also to live by faith. God is in charge. God will judge. And by faith, above all, longing for Jesus Christ to return and to usher in his new creation.

Because doesn't Ecclesiastes make you long for a world that is fair? A world without death. A world without injustice. A world which doesn't seem to revolve simply around chance.

[27 : 42] Let's pray together. The Apostle John in Revelation 21 as he sees a vision of the new heaven and the new earth. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God.

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more. Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the realism of your word. Thank you that we don't have to live in a world of make-believe. Thank you for the way in which you so kindly show us what life is like living in this world.

Thank you for the confidence we can have that you are sovereign and in charge, that the Lord Jesus will return on the final day. and above all, thank you for the glorious anticipation of the new creation where there will be no more death and we pray that you would help us to long for it and to live in the light of it.

[29 : 04] And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen.