

Christmas Wreath Making

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[0 : 00] 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 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.

However much a 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.

[1 : 40] 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 sacrifice.

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.

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 be always white, let not oil be lacking on your head.

[2 : 55] 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 to which 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.

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.

[4 : 17] Now you don't need to have had a huge amount of contact with young children, or any children, I guess, to realise that justice is hardwired into each one of us.

As one child insists, it's my turn, she did it last time. Another complains, you didn't let me do that when I was seven, or she's got more than me, or it's not fair, he always gets away with it.

All those illustrations are obviously entirely hypothetical when it comes to our own household. Now, of course, one way to respond to such outrage is to try to be scrupulously fair, or at least to explain why, on this particular occasion, things didn't quite work out the way they should have done. But I think if we were to go to the Ecclesiastes parenting session, we'd be given a very different answer. You're right. It's not fair.

But that's life. You better get used to it. Just try that next time you are faced with a barrage of it's not fair. But I guess as we grow up, justice and injustice, as Nick reminded us earlier, is never far from the headlines.

[5 : 46] Although, as the 17th century French mathematician Blaise Pascal wrote, justice is as much a matter of fashion as charm. By which he meant that our demand for justice is faddish.

It's subject to fashion just as much as the clothes that we wear are subject to fashion. Justice in Tibet is no longer the cause it once was, despite the fact that the Chinese state continues to destroy their civilization.

Few people consider the persecution of Christians in the Middle East worth mentioning. While the Kurds, who have risen to the top of the kind of justice interest stakes and are receiving a lot of attention at the moment, will no doubt in a year or two be forgotten again, just as they have for much of their history.

In other words, the very way in which we demand justice is itself unfair. Or perhaps our sense of injustice is actually much closer to home.

Perhaps we didn't get that job, because despite the fact that we are better qualified, actually the person who got the job was better connected. Or perhaps we've been diagnosed with a medical condition that is life-changing.

[7 : 05] Or we have a child with significant needs, which makes life exhausting. Well, this passage of Ecclesiastes shows us God's answer to injustice.

And you'll find the talk outline, as usual, on the back of the service sheet. First of all, life is unfair. Life is unfair.

First of all, because of injustice. 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. The wicked are praised in life, and so often they are honoured in death. During their lives, they pass themselves off as respected members of the community, and then in their death, they are honoured.

So outrageous. So unjust. When we were living in the East End several years ago, the gangster Reggie Cray died.

[8 : 09] And he and his brother, Ronnie, had been at the heart, the foremost perpetrators of organised crime in the East End of London in the 1950s and 1960s.

And yet, he was buried a hero. The pavements were packed with crowds as the horse-drawn hearse was taken through the streets of Bethnal Green.

And how was he being described? As a bit of a rogue. You know, the kind of way in which you might describe a naughty schoolboy rather than a vicious gangster.

Life is unfair. What's more, 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.

[9 : 11] And there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said this also is vanity. No doubt we can all think of good, honourable people for whom life has been unbearably hard.

And no doubt too we can think of, or perhaps we remember reading of, crooks for whom life, frankly, has ended very well. And life has been a breeze.

In other words, real life is far removed from the movies where the baddies get caught and the goodies live life happily ever after.

Because in the real world, that is often do well. Injustice. Secondly, chance.

And I put the word chance in speech marks because, of course, the Bible doesn't believe in chance. Everything happens under the sovereignty of God. And yet the kind of, the randomness with which events can take place, the randomness with which things hit us, it can feel like chance.

[10:20] 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 intelligent, nor favour to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.

Life so often is simply not the way in which we think it should be. Think of a top athlete who doesn't win their race because of some random injury, or a politician who is discredited because of the failure of one of their staff members.

Or think of those caught up in the London Bridge tragedy on Friday. You know, why them? Why not someone else? They were just doing what they do any day.

It just seems so random. When South Africa beat England in the Rugby World Cup a few weeks ago, there were lots of comparisons made with their victory in 1995 over New Zealand.

And yet, tragically, two of the most fated players from that game are now dead. New Zealand's Jonah Lomu and South Africa's Jost van der Westhausen rather than enjoying middle age.

[11:32] In fact, four of the players from that South African team have subsequently died. The race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong.

Or look at the parable in chapter 9, verses 14 and 15. There was a little city with few men in it and a great king who came against it and besieged it, building great siege works against it.

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

In other words, it's far too easy to have what we might call a slot machine view of God and a slot machine view of the world. In other words, the good guys get the good things and the bad guys, they get their just desserts.

At one extreme, there's the prosperity gospel which says, become a Christian, put your trust in Jesus and your life will be successful, you'll be wealthy and healthy, your problems will all disappear.

[12:42] And yet deep down, I take it none of us are immune to that. Deep down, don't we think the children of godly parents should turn out well and themselves follow Jesus?

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

You can't tell those who are Christians by the smart cars they drive or by the amount of money they earn or the things that happen to them. There are plenty of Christians who are unemployed, for whom life is very hard and difficult, for whom their family situation perhaps is a nightmare or whose health packs up in their 60s.

It's very important that we grasp the way the world is. Otherwise, when life is unfair, we'll either blame God or we'll simply pretend everything is fine.

When actually, we are aching and life is painful. But wonderfully, you see, the Bible liberates us from that. It tells us about life as it really is.

[14:07] Life is unfair. But so is death. Death is unfair. 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. 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 sacrifice.

The point about death is the same event happens to everyone. Go to a mortuary. Everyone looks the same. Indeed, it is the very fairness, if you like, of death, that it comes to everyone, regardless of the life that they have lived, that makes it seem so unfair.

It is so indiscriminating. Something that verse 3, if you look at it, describes as evil. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all.

[15:23] And yet, the verse goes on to say, it is what we deserve. 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 be, they go to the dead.

It's just what Adam and Eve were told in the Garden of Eden. If they rejected God's good rule, they would die. And that, in turn, is what leads to the sheer pessimism.

I wonder if you thought to yourself, this is pretty gloomy, the sheer pessimism of verses 4 and 5. Death really is the end. Verse 4, a living dog is better than a dead lion.

Verse 5, the dead know nothing. The memory of them is forgotten. Verse 6, whatever kind of person they are, whether they're full of love or full of hate or envy, they have gone. What's more, you can't know when death will come. Verse 12, for man does not know his time, like fish that are taken in the evil nets 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.

[16:38] Like fish, one moment swimming blissfully along, enjoying life, everything is working out exactly how you thought it would do, everything seems to be going to plan, everything seems to be on track, and the next moment, death has you in its net as you face an endless round of hospital appointments.

Death makes the world an unfair place. As I mentioned last week, a number of years ago, some Christian friends of ours, a wonderful, godly Christian couple, were their two boys driving back from holiday and they were involved in a terrible car crash.

They had served a number of local churches, they were very gifted, he was killed instantly, she was left in hospital for months, recovering from her injuries, while the two boys were being looked after by grandparents.

Now, of course, you and I know that these kinds of things happen, people, but why should it happen to a Christian family? Why should it happen to a family with many years of gospel ministry and gospel service ahead of them?

Why does death strike the righteous in the same way that it strikes the wicked? Life is unfair. Death is unfair.

[18:01] And it begs the question, how then should we live in such an unfair world? I guess in the popular imagination, the Bible is a million miles removed, isn't it, from reality.

And Christians kind of live, again, in the popular imagination, in a sort of fairy tale world of make-believe. Which is why one of the things I love about Ecclesiastes is simply its earthy realism. And I know a number of others have really appreciated that. A number of you have said to me over the last few weeks how very refreshing it has been. So how do we live in an unfair world?

Well, firstly, we are to understand the world. We understand the world. Have a look at chapter 8, verses 16 and 17, where the contrast is a simple one.

It is between our limited understanding of the world and God. Chapter 8, verse 16. 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 see sleep.

[19:13] 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. I wonder if you've had that enormously frustrating experience of locking yourself out of your home and you've had to wait perhaps until a family member comes along with a front door key to let you in or the neighbour comes back from work and eventually they can let you in with a spare key or something like that. Well, in a far greater way, we are locked out, as it were, of understanding the way the world is. You and I cannot work it out simply by observation.

You know, there are things we can work out, aren't there, by observation. You see some clouds coming, you think, yeah, it's going to be, it's going to rain. But we cannot understand the way the world is in terms of injustice and unfairness simply by observation or simply, as verse 17 puts it, simply by looking at life under the sun.

No, we need God to come along with the key to unlock the world for us so that we understand why it is so unfair. Because you and I don't live in a world of chance, but we do live in a world where everything has been ruined by sin.

[20:41] It takes us back to some of the key verses we thought about in Ecclesiastes over these last few weeks. Chapter 1, verse 15, what is crooked cannot be made straight. What is lacking cannot be counted.

Chapter 7, verse 13, consider the work of God who can make straight what he has made crooked. And chapter 7, verse 20, surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

It is God who has made the world as it is. It is God who has subjected this world to frustration. We live in a world under his judgment.

We live in a world which is groaning, where everything in life has been swept away by the tsunami of sin. And that is why life is so often simply perplexing, however intelligent or wise we are. In other words, Ecclesiastes gives us a world view if you like which is big enough to face the pain and injustice of life.

[21 : 52] He doesn't kind of sweep everything under the carpet and pretending it doesn't exist. I guess it's easy to do that, isn't it? Especially in a largely middle class area. So it doesn't sweep everything under the carpet.

Nor does it pretend that we can fix life ourselves. It's what the politicians would have us believe, whether it's Labour saying we can fix life by implementing the most radical programme for government this country's ever seen, or whether it's the Conservatives saying we'll fix life by getting Brexit done.

No. However much money is spent on whatever your pet causes are, whether our confidence is in the state or the free market or something in the middle, we will always live in a world in which life is unfair and death is unfair.

And Ecclesiastes gives us a worldview that is big enough to live in that world by understanding the way the world is. In other words, one of the great gifts that God gives us is the gift of understanding. Doesn't sound very exciting, does it? you know, who has asked for Father Christmas? You know, can I please have a child writing letter, Dear Father Christmas, can I please have the gift of understanding for Christmas?

[23 : 15] Doesn't sound very exciting at all. And yet it's a wonderfully precious thing to understand why our world is as it is. To understand why life is as it is.

To grasp that this is how life is always going to be until the Lord Jesus returns. Which means that as well as understanding our world, we are secondly to long for justice.

Not in this world, but in the world to come. When Jesus returns at the end of history, he will act in judgment to bring perfect justice.

that is alluded to in chapter 8 verses 12 and 13. Chapter 8 verse 12, 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. Now at first reading, the preacher seems to contradict himself, doesn't he?

[24 : 24] In verse 12, the sinner, or as we might say, the person who's not trusting in Jesus, does prolong his life, but then in verse 13, he doesn't prolong his life. So what is going on?

Well, I take it that in this life, verse 12 is true. So often those, as we've said already, who are not trusting in Jesus do flourish, they retire well, they live long, and so on, but in the next life, verse 13 is true.

They won't flourish, they face the judgment. After all, it's not just children, is it, squabbling at a meal table, who cry out for justice.

Our whole world cries out for justice. Indeed, the Christian author, C.S. Lewis, thought it fundamental to who we are, as those who are made in God's image, that we cry out for justice. He said this, the only reason you recognize injustice at all, is that you've been made with a God inherited need for justice. We all long for a world that is fair, a world without death, a world without injustice, a world in which life doesn't so often seem to just revolve around chance and randomness.

[25 : 42] I hope Ecclesiastes has made us long for that world even more. And the New Testament warns us not to mistake the delay in God bringing justice with a carelessness about justice and assume that he has quietly dropped it from his manifesto.

I put a couple of the verses there on the outline which we had read earlier from 2 Peter chapter 3. People assuming the world would simply carry on as it always has done and that the Lord Jesus wouldn't return.

2 Peter chapter 3 verses 8 and 9 But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day.

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness but is patient towards you not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance.

And that call to repentance may well be an urgent one for one or two of us here this morning. In an unfair world we can live expectantly waiting for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[27 : 07] Thirdly, in an unfair world enjoy life. 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.

Joy. I wonder if you've noticed how joy keeps on popping up in Ecclesiastes and often in rather unsurprising places like in this passage here in a passage all about death and injustice is suddenly this verse pops up on joy.

Not that joy is the answer to life but in our fallen world there's still and we've said this before a kind of residue if you like of God's good original creation design that we can enjoy.

Indeed if you look over to chapter 9 verses 9 and 10 it's striking I think how many of the things in those two verses are echoes of the Garden of Eden. chapter 9 verse 9 Enjoy life with a wife whom you love all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun because this 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 to which you are going. Likewise verse 7 which I should also have read before I went on to verse 9 verse 7 Go eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a merry heart for God has already approved what you do.

[28 : 46] Then verse 8 Clothes let your garments be always white. Can you hear the echoes of the Garden of Eden? Marriage work clothing food goodness bountiful provision.

I take it it's when we understand the way the world is. I take it it's when our center of gravity if you like is focused on the return of Jesus and the new creation.

I take it it's then that we're able to enjoy God's kindness and goodness. Those residue bits if you like of the original goodness of creation.

Perhaps it means we won't be eaten up with injustice when we don't get that promotion or job which we feel we ought to have got but someone else got it instead. Perhaps we won't fall into despair when our children don't turn out the way in which we would like them to turn out or when they fail to get into the school we hoped that they would get into and was the school of their choice.

Or we won't lose our faith when a loved one dies or develops a serious health condition. Even in ill health we'll be able to live with gratitude and joy because we understand the way the world is.

[30 : 10] And we are trusting in the Lord Jesus to return looking forward to the new creation and nor will we sink into cynicism or simply be overwhelmed by the torrent of bad news in the media or by climate change or whatever it is.

Joy because we understand the way the world is because we're looking forward to the Lord Jesus to return. I guess it's fair to say that all of us live with dreams and ambitions.

You know when we're young perhaps you dream of being a pilot or an actor or something like that or that's what you dreamt of when you were young. As we get older we have our hopes pinned on an apprenticeship or a degree or then the right job and we think we'd like to be married and to have children and to live in a particular area.

We imagine what life will be like as it unfolds. What we'll be doing, who we'll be doing it with, what life will feel like, how it will progress until finally we long to reach old age surrounded by family, grandchildren and so on.

And Ecclesiastes tells us that we may do all of those things or we may be dead by the end of the year or we may be something in between.

[31 : 38] Your career may plateau, you may never get married, you may never be able to afford the lifestyle that you would like, you may be widowed sooner than you planned.

I wonder if you can see what God is saying to us. put your faith somewhere else. Have your ambitions somewhere else.