

The Place of Wisdom

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 0 0] I think what we're finding is that it's an uncomfortable book. It pokes away at our pride and our self-righteousness. And so far it's been poking us with hevel, this Hebrew word for vanity, the fact that our lives are a wisp of smoke here today and gone tomorrow, that we cannot call the tune and we cannot master ourselves, that we can't control things, we can't comprehend things.

And if there's one thing I've learned, Ecclesiastes wants us to think deeply. Take chapter 7 verse 2, just go back in the Bible to it.

The writer says, It's better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind and the living will lay it to heart.

That's classic Ecclesiastes. He says death teaches us more than life does. Because in life we keep pretending we're in control and that we understand things.

But come with me to the graveside or the crematorium. Follow the person in their last days in hospital perhaps, to the mortuary, to the casket.

[1 : 1 2] They may have been old and lived a long life, or they may have been young and had lots of promise, or they may have been middle-aged with a lot of people depending on them. It doesn't really matter. But if you come that journey, you'll see how passing and uncertain we are, and everything that we are chasing.

And Ecclesiastes is a great shock to our shallow, superficial spirituality, as well as to any shallow, superficial secularity.

That no amount of pleasure or achievement or self-improvement can enable me to fix my life because hevel, this vanity, touches everything.

And today we come to chapter 8, and the chapter is not so clear on its own because it stands on the top of chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7. So I'm going to stray a little bit.

We'll be flicking backwards and forwards to look at some key passages. And in chapter 8, he gives us two working examples. And he begins chapter 8 in verse 1 by telling us what he's discovered about wisdom.

[2 : 1 9] So chapter 8, verse 1. Who is like the wise? And the way it's written is, the answer is no one. And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

The answer is nobody. A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed. Really? I don't understand what that means.

So chapters 1 to 3, he used his wisdom to search for meaning and permanence and joy. But in chapters 4 to 7, he steps back from wisdom itself.

And he says, although wisdom is precious and good in itself, it's like money, it's like strength, it's certainly better than being a fool. It's not the solution.

It can't fix hevel. It can't save me. It can't give me control or comprehension even. In fact, he says again and again that wisdom often brings more sorrow than foolishness.

[3 : 1 9] Look at chapter 7, verse 23. All this I've tested by wisdom and said, I will be wise, but it was far from me.

That which has been is far off, deep, very deep. Who can find it out? It doesn't matter how many books I read or how many seminars I've been to or how many conferences or blogs I learn.

I can't fix the fact that I live in a world that is fallen, marked by hevel, where things are crooked and corrupt and confused with no meaning in themselves.

And here's the transition in chapters 4 to 8. Why is this? Why does hevel work in this way? And the reason is, the writer says, because of what is underneath hevel.

And in chapters 4 to 8, the language of vanity and hevel falls into the background and another language comes to the foreground. It is the language of evil and sin.

[4 : 26] This is one of the most important things the Bible does for us. It calls evil, evil. There's no interest in abstract philosophy. In fact, chapters 4 to 8 are about the evil trifecta, injustice, greed and death.

And it's written with great sympathy. And I'm sure if you have any sympathy whatsoever when you read it, you will weep. Now this week I read a wonderful article by Alana Newhouse in a tablet magazine.

It's a Jewish online magazine sent to me by a friend. She humbly titled the article Everything is Broken and How to Fix It. She tells the heartbreaking story of how her first born son received a brain injury in the States because of the negligence of the delivery doctor.

And it took years to figure it out. And when she did, as a journalist, she went deep into how broken the American medical system is. It's quite a brilliant article.

And she applies this brokenness to the education system, to the system of housing and farming and cities and religion. And she describes this brokenness as a sort of a flatness where we all conform to certain values.

[5 : 47] And those values are focused to conformism by big tech and big pharma and big money. It's a very powerful lament. But in the end, her advice is this.

Start a publishing house. Start a newspaper. Talk to real people, not online. Give up on the current institutions. It's a wonderful and jaunty description of the brokenness of North American society.

But she has no real solution. And the reason is this. She stays at the level of Hevel. And she doesn't take the next step to deal with evil.

And the thing that we know is that God did not create the world with Hevel in the first place, with meaninglessness or vanity. The paradise that God created was full of meaning.

It had gain in it and satisfaction, enjoyment, blessing and rest. And then we come to the third chapter in the Bible. And it describes how sin and evil enter the world.

[6 : 49] And it comes from the rejection of God by man and woman. And how man and woman set out to play their own wisdom and to play God with their own wisdom.

And the result is that God evicts the man and woman from the garden paradise and places all of this creation under Hevel, frustration and vanity.

And He also puts eternity in our hearts so that we would not understand life by our own wisdom, but so that we would keep searching for what the point of life is until we find Him.

He does this so as to save us from ourselves, to bring us to the glorious freedom of a new creation which will not be marked by evil or Hevel. So now in this life, Hevel is set in place by God.

But God has done it not to mock us, but to mend us. Not to crush us, but to bring us to cure. Not to diminish us, but so that we would diagnose the issue as evil and direct us to His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who came to deal with that evil and death.

[8 : 04] So how do we live in the face of evil? This is the point of chapter 8. And He makes two points basically, evil in high places and evil in our hearts.

So they're my two headings. Number one, evil in high places verses 2 to 9 of chapter 8. And as Louise read it, you can see how immediately relevant it is, don't you?

I mean, the preacher places someone in a work situation, and in this case, a royal court, surrounded by incompetence, corruption, foolish decisions, and evil.

The person in charge is powerful and foolish and uses their power for evil. Look down at verse 9, please. Chapter 8, verse 9. All this I observed while applying my heart to all that's done under the sun, when man had power over man to his evil, the word is.

So how do you live as a wise person in this world when so many people just don't do the job that they're supposed to do? When those in charge make bad decisions and pass it down the line?

[9 : 15] You could work in any company in the world, and this would be true. You could work in any political system. You could work in teaching or engineering or law or finance or medicine and know exactly what this is talking about.

Now what is really going on? We need to step back into the context a bit. Is it just incompetence of a lot of well-meaning people? The preacher says, actually, what lies underneath these decisions is greed, envy.

It's not just hevel. There is an evil in our hearts in high places. Go back to chapter 4, verse 4 for just a moment. Chapter 4, 4 says, Then I saw all the toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbour.

This also is vanity and a striving after wind. Down to verse 7. Again, I saw vanity under the sun. One person who has no other, either son or brother, yet there's no end to all his toil and his eyes are never satisfied with riches so that he never asks, For whom am I toiling and depriving myself of pleasure?

This also is vanity and an evil business, the word is. So what drives the market? What drives competition? It's basically envy.

[10 : 35] It's greed. It's the fear of missing out. It's the dream that if I get more, I'll be happy and I want to pass that pain on to others. And it's not just greed for more money.

It's greed for position and power. It can be greed for popularity. And most of us are completely unaware of how greedy we are. Instead of having our eyes fixed on God, we look horizontally, comparing ourselves to each other and we're always wanting more and envying others.

Because if we get more, we think that the things that we get, finally I'm going to be able to enjoy my life. And Solomon says, what happens if God removes the ability for you to enjoy things?

Look at chapter 6, verse 1. There is an evil that I've seen under the sun and it lies heavy on mankind, a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions and honour, popularity, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them.

But a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity and a grievous evil. The power to enjoy the good gifts of life comes from God alone.

[11 : 49] And that is why Solomon commends joy in chapter 8, verse 15. I commend joy for man has nothing better under the sun than to eat and drink and be joyful.

This will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun. So a key part of, a key part of the solution or a key part of the life of a believer is learning to be a receiver not an achiever.

It's learning we live by grace and not by gain. Because as we begin to learn to receive all that we have from the good hand of God, that means we can hold things with an open hand because they come from him and we can try and give up trying to control them and pull the levers and play God with them or try to fix our lives with them but to receive them from God, from the hands of God, it'll mean joy and pleasure.

Change is why you go to work in the morning and that's evil in high places but I need to move quickly to the second issue in chapter 8 and that is evil in our hearts.

And from verse 10 onward, Solomon deals with injustice and he gives us a couple of scenarios. So in verse 10, he gives the scenario of justice delayed.

[13:18] He takes us to another funeral of a man who Solomon describes as wicked. It's a word that has resonance with evil. This is someone who's made their wealth by injustice and oppression, by greed and evil and they might have died with a hundred legal charges following them.

They've managed to get delays by bribing all the right people and they've never answered for any of the things that they've done. And on the day of the funeral, the eulogies bear no semblance to the truth in praising the person.

And you may think that Solomon would come along in chapter 8 and give a searing denunciation of the legal system of his day but he does not. What he does is he turns the finger back on each of us and he says justice delayed is not just justice denied but it is evil aroused in our hearts because everyone carries this evil around in our hearts and when we see justice delayed it incites us towards evil.

Look at verse 11 of chapter 8. Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.

Look at the second scenario in verse 14 when bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people we think Lord if I was in charge I'd do a much better job.

[14:52] I mean it is nauseating isn't it to see those who do evil succeed and get ahead it just seems upside down it offends our sense of justice. and so if you get in charge I think the best thing humans have come up with is a sort of a form of karma where when I'm good I get reward and when I'm bad I get payback but if karma was in place there's not a single one of us who'd be alive at the end of the day if we really got what we deserved.

I think Solomon is tying into something very deep here. we hate injustice. Every single one of us knows what it's like to be on the receiving end.

Perhaps not as demeaning or dehumanising or degrading as systematic oppression but what do we do when power is abused for evil?

This is a very current question today and the answer that is in popular culture is that we express outrage on social media. We take back the power. you become an activist.

You use your passion. You join with other people and work together to challenge and change and cancel injustice. And I'm not just talking about slacktivism.

[16:10] You know, make yourself an online activist. You appear concerned by joining the right cause but you really do as little as you can to make a difference. And this is sometimes called clicktivism where you click a link to a cause you like to make yourself look good.

You know, it's 100% exposure and 0% accountability. But all you're doing is you're setting up yourself as judge of everyone else and taking the posture of outrage.

And it can just be virtue signaling because it puts you in the right group where you feel you're self-righteous but it doesn't do anything to change evil on the ground. However, it's completely understandable in the face of hypocrisy and injustice.

And it's very interesting if you go back chapters 4 to 7, there is a subtle deconstruction of power used for evil. Look at the beginning of chapter 4 with me in verse 1 and 2 for a moment.

Solomon says, again, I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun and behold the tears of the oppressed that they had no one to comfort them.

[17 : 22] On the side of the oppressors there was power but there was no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead who are already dead more fortunate than the living who are still alive.

Better than both is he who has not yet been born and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. Solomon. This is tender and poignant stuff from the preacher.

It comes from a pastor's heart. He's not lobbing grenades here. You can hear tears in his words. Solomon loves his people. He's deeply distressed by oppression and injustice.

And certainly in the first half of his rule he had a good track record for equity in writing injustice. And the thing that so deeply affects the preacher is that the exercise of evil in power or power in evil means that there's no one to comfort the oppressed.

No one. He says it twice. And then I think you get the saddest verse in the whole book. It's better to be dead. It's better if you'd never been born.

[18 : 28] At least you'd be spared the anguish of seeing this injustice. It's not the sunny Canadian view of life is it? Nor is it the language of outrage.

It's the language of evil. It's naming evil as evil. And naming evil as evil you can only really do if there's a God. Because if there is no God what you call evil and what I call evil is just our points of view.

I have my point of view. And it all depends the way we're going to deal with this debate generally ends on where you come on the ladder of power and privilege.

language. And in the end all we can do is cancel each other out. But here is this Bible word evil. It's what destroys what's deadly and distressing and harmful and ugly and misery and bad.

It's anything against God and his purposes. God is the one who stands behind every human being. It's God who gives humans our dignity. evil and vanity and I don't think you can explain evil and vanity without facing up to evil.

[19 : 38] Otherwise we're going to remain perpetually naive on the pendulum swinging from one solution to another. And Solomon says just don't be shocked by this.

Look at chapter 5 verse 8. It's fascinating isn't it in that verse that the Bible agrees that oppression, the violation of human rights, even racism is systemic.

There is evil in the structures and it's pervasive and that should not surprise anyone who reads the Bible because we know evil lives in high places because it lives in our hearts, the hearts of each one of us.

Which doesn't mean we should be passive and do nothing or fatalistic or uncaring. But what it means is, Solomon says, we should be reluctant to seize power.

And go off and march on the capital. Because every time we replace one system with another, we're not dealing with the underlying cause. That's what Solomon means in chapter 7.

[20 : 58] Look at verse 7. Surely oppression drives the wise into madness. And a bribe corrupts the heart.

Better is the end of a thing than its beginning. And the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Do not be quick in your spirit to become angry. For anger lodges in the hearts of fools.

Because the temptation in the face of injustice and oppression is to play the same game. To take back power with power. And Solomon says it's a kind of madness and it's self-corrupting.

Because it's just so easy for me to imagine that I'm the righteous one. That I'm going to call out that person or I'm going to call out that organisation. So I set myself up as judge. But when I try to take back power, my next step is to create a mob and exercise power in a way that's ungodly and evil.

I read this week that Mr Bean, Rowan Atkinson, the actor who plays him, called out the cancel culture. He called it a medieval mob roaming the streets looking for someone to burn.

[22 : 08] And you know when Mr Bean calls out the cancel culture, we're in trouble. That's why in chapter 8 Solomon advises prudence. Bit of an anticlimax you may say.

He doesn't say burn it down. He doesn't say opt out. He knows that politics is imperfectable. Because evil is in each of us.

We keep wanting to make this life not fallen. To build a paradise here to get ahead. And Solomon said it's all striving after wind. You can't solve evil with evil.

That only corrupts and makes more evil. He says there is a time and there is a way to be engaged in this. And he says evil does not have the final word.

And then he points us in two directions and I just want to finish my time on these two things. He points us in two directions. The first is to look to God. And I want you to see my favourite verse in Ecclesiastes.

[23 : 12] It's chapter 7 verse 16. Be not overly righteous and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?

When I first read it I thought that's the perfect verse for perfectionists. Stop trying so hard. Don't worry. Be happy. Don't sweat the small stuff. And you could say particularly injustice but that is not at all what it means.

It's an encouragement to trust God alone and it's a warning against looking to anything in this world to fix our lives even righteousness and wisdom.

We know from chapter 2 that all the pleasures in the world won't do it. The high achievements are the self improvements. You know the new job, the new partner, the new holiday, that's not going to do it.

But the point of chapter 7 verse 16 is this. Neither will our righteousness or wisdom do it. Because my righteousness and my wisdom cannot deal with evil.

[24 : 19] I think we often think that it's my kindness and my cleverness and my goodness that's going to make life go well for me. That if I just, if I'm very wise and I'm very righteous, somehow I'm going to avoid hevel.

Solomon says, no, no, our salvation is in God alone. It's not in politics. It's not in social justice. It's not in righteousness.

It's not in wisdom. And we know as we read on that God has dealt the death blow to evil in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That Christ has become our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness, and our redemption. As the Bible's chief offer to us is not wisdom.

It's not good advice. It's not seven steps to a good and happy life. It's news. It's the good news of God's grace to save us from ourselves and from this fallen world.

[25 : 16] Offering us the cross of Jesus Christ to deal with evil. The resurrection of Jesus Christ to make us new and to deal with death itself. Because we don't need good advice. We've got plenty of that.

What we need is good news. So look to God. Secondly, he says, fear God. Chapter 8, verses 12 and 13.

Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know, this is a faith statement, 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. In the end, God will deal with evil.

We've confessed this earlier in our gathering. Christ will come to judge the living and the dead. There is a judge. It's not you. And it's not me. And he says here, there is no blessing for the wicked after the grave.

[26 : 19] And I think this is the big takeaway for us today. Since God alone is our creator and judge, and since he's placed this world under heaven, and since he will deal with evil finally and ultimately, we should fear before him and revere him.

Not be afraid of God, but recognize his greatness and his holiness and his magnetism. It's not the fear that drives us away from God.

It's the great shock of grace, the greatness of his grace that draws us to him. And it's not just the recognition of the greatness of his grace, but it is the recognition of the greatness of his grace and his presence.

We don't just fear God, we fear before him. We live in his presence. So as we build our sand castle, God is there. He is with us.

We know it will be well for those who fear him. Doesn't mean we'll understand everything. Doesn't mean that everything will be calm and easy. This is the same promise, the essence of the same promise that Jesus made to the thief on the cross.

[27 : 31] You will be with me in paradise, the paradise that I am making anew. Live for me and live for that day. Amen.