

Sovereignty and Sinfulness

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening and a very warm welcome to our evening service here from Stornoway. We are grateful to you for joining us and we do pray once again that God will bless to us his own word and our being together in this way so that to the glory of his name we come to worship him. We're going to begin by praising him and our praise item to begin with is Psalm 47.

Psalm number 47, that's from the Scottish Psalter, it's on page 272 of the psalm books. And verses 5 to 9, we're going to sing verses 5 to 9, the tune is Gainsborough.

God is with shouts gone up, the Lord with trumpets sounding high. Sing praise to God, sing praise, sing praise, praise to our King, sing ye. For God is King of all the earth, with knowledge, praise express.

God rules the nations, God sits on his throne of holiness. And so on to the end of the psalm, Psalm 47 and at verse 5, God is with shouts gone up.

God is with shouts gone up, the Lord with trumpets sounding high.

[1 : 26] God is with shouts gone up, the Lord with trumpets sounding high.

God is with shouts gone up, the Lord with trumpets, God is with shouts gone up, the Lord with marisks of the psalm.

Tremble, dwellingly, in all the God of Abraham, they who the people be.

For why the shields that do defend the air are only his?

Let to the Lord be long ye exalted greatly.

[3 : 23] Our first reading tonight is from Revelation, the book of Revelation, chapter 4. And we can read through the whole chapter. After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven.

And the first voice, which I heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this. At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.

And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.

From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings, and peals of thunder. And before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God.

And before the throne there was, as it were, a sea of glass, like crystal. And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind.

[4 : 34] The first living creature, like a lion. The second living creature, like an ox. The third living creature, with the face of a man. And the fourth living creature, like an eagle in flight.

And the four living creatures, each of them, with six wings, are full of eyes, all around and within. And day and night they never cease to say, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever.

They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.

Amen. We pray that God will follow with his blessing our reading of his word. Let's now join together in prayer. Let's call upon the Lord in prayer. Gracious and eternal Lord God Almighty, the one of whom we have been reading and singing through your word, we bless you tonight for your greatness, for the sovereignty of your rule, and for the exercise, O Lord, of that government which is yours, in a way that fits with your purpose.

[6 : 10] And we thank you, O Lord, that as we, as your creatures, come to face you this evening in worship, that we are given this privilege, that we come before your very throne, through Jesus Christ, O Lord.

And as surely as we are reading off your throne and your word, Lord, help us, we pray, to understand, as much as we can, that we are before your throne now, as we worship you.

Not in the immediate sense in which those who inhabit heaven are before your throne, but nevertheless we approach you as our king. We approach you as one who is worthy of our praise, worthy of the perfect praise of heaven itself, that will go on through all eternity.

We thank you, Lord, in your greatness, that you have not looked beyond us, that you have not put us away from you, and in your greatness you have stooped down toward us, even as you said to your people Israel long ago, through Moses, that you had heard their cry of affliction and had come down to rescue them.

We ask, O Lord, that you would hear our cry this evening. We give you thanks that we know that you have already descended into this world that we belong to in such a remarkable way.

[7 : 31] You have come in the person of your Son. You have taken not only our humanity to yourself, you have taken the sin of your people. You have taken their punishment, their curse.

You have paid the price of their sin. You have provided a glorious and rich salvation. And we thank you tonight, Lord, that we, through faith in Christ, that we come to avail ourselves, to hold and to possess that glorious salvation.

We thank you, too, Lord, for your wisdom, the wisdom with which you govern the whole universe that you have created. We are so puny, O Lord, in your presence, and especially we are sinful and darkened in our minds by our sin.

And yet, in coming toward us, you have revealed to us, O Lord, that you are great also in compassion and in love. And we thank you tonight that we look to you as one who continues to behold his people in love and who holds them precious as his own people.

And we pray, O Lord, that as we gather together with many others today to worship you, that we may be conscious, O Lord, not only of your greatness and almightiness and of your love, but of your constant interest in us and of the way that you constantly continue to reach out toward us through the gospel and call us to yourself.

[9 : 08] Bless us then, Lord, we pray tonight. Bless us as we gather in this way once again. We do thank you again for this facility. And we thank you that we are able to be gathered together in this way, strange though it may be, but help us, Lord, we pray, not to get so used to it that we would rather this to being together physically.

For we know from your word that this is the best position of all for us in this world, that we are assembled together and that we have a consciousness in being together, that we are together before the Lord.

Yet, Lord, we give thanks for the way in which you have kept us and led us during these months. We pray that as the virus seems to be increasing throughout our land and throughout the world, Lord, we ask that you would continue to protect us, to watch over us, to look after us.

We pray that you would help us to see not only how serious the virus itself is, but also, Lord, lead us, we pray, to see how serious our sin is.

for these reminders that you give us in your providence through such great and grievous events as these have always, by those to whom you have given wisdom through your spirit, been regarded as true indicators of our relationship with you and our need of you.

[10 : 35] We do, O Lord, pray tonight that you would teach us as a people how much we do need you. You have demonstrated, Lord, to us even through these past months how impossible it is for ourselves as human beings to control our own lives, to be in charge of our own destiny, let alone our day-to-day practice.

But we have thanks, Lord, that you are the one who is able to do this, who has that ability and capacity always. We pray that you would teach us even anew tonight through your word, through the blessing that we seek from your spirit, to give ourselves anew into your governorship and into your control and to place ourselves willingly under your lordship.

Teach us, we pray, as a people. Teach our people, our nation, these great principles and practices that your word sets before us. Lord, we pray that many will come to reflect deeply and seriously upon their lives, upon eternal matters, upon their relation to you, to the gospel, to your truth, to your church.

Help us, we pray, as your people, to be faithful in representing you, to be faithful in calling the gospel for what it is, the light of your truth.

Help us to maintain it and to preserve it, to defend it, to commend it. We ask, O Lord, that through your spirit many will be blessed, through the testimony of your word and the witness of your people.

[12 : 12] We remember, once again, before you, those who have affliction tonight of various kinds, some related to this virus, others related to other health issues or mental health issues, loss and sorrow and bereavement and addictions, various things which blight of human lives.

Lord, be merciful to them, we pray, and teach them your ways. O Lord, we ask that any tonight who mourn the passing of loved ones in these recent days will know of your own comfort.

We pray that you would still all our hearts, O Lord, whatever our experiences may be in these times, still our hearts to know that you are God and that as you are God, so you know, as we cannot know, those things which are good for us.

We ask your blessing for our homes, our families, our teachers, our schools, our hospitals and care homes, all the work in our communities, the undertaker, his staff, all those who are with us at such vital times in our need and in our experience.

Lord, we pray for them. We ask that you would continue to bless and uphold them. We pray that you bless our leaders at this time in the nation. O Lord, guide them, we pray, whatever their thoughts may be about eternal matters, whatever they may be in their relationship with you, you have called us to pray for them.

[13 : 41] We do so again tonight and ask that you would give them guidance and wisdom above themselves, above the guidance and the advice that they receive of a human kind.

O Lord, lead them into your truth and by your truth. Give them to be made wise unto salvation. Remember then, O Lord, all the kingdoms of the world.

Turn many to righteousness, we pray at this time. Hear your people as they pray to you, as they appeal to you to come, to intervene, to provide for us, Lord, a way out of this crisis.

We know from your word that so many times in history you brought people to the point where they realised only the Lord could save them and deliver them and open a door for them into safety.

So we pray that that may be our experience too and we pray, O Lord, that you would continue to provide for us the rich things of gospel, spiritual life during these times.

[14 : 44] Hear us then, we pray, and continue with us now and pardon our sin. Hear us, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen. Now children, tonight we're looking again at the I Am sayings of Jesus.

This is the second one we started last time, looking at the I Am sayings of Jesus. Tonight we're looking at the saying that Jesus gives us in chapter 8 of John's gospel, chapter 8 and verse 12.

Jesus spoke to them again saying, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

And we know at this time that as Jesus was speaking these words, we find in verse 20, these words he spoke in the treasury as he taught in the temple, a part of the temple known in those days as the treasury.

And we know from some records that one of the features of this particular time and part of the temple was a huge, huge light.

[15 : 50] Something like a giant candelabra or like a giant chandelier you might say, hanging there in the temple and we're told from historical records that the light of it was so, it was so big and so powerful and the light of it, so much light came from it that it shone out into the streets of the city of Jerusalem.

And you can imagine Jesus at that time speaking these words, everybody conscious of this great light in the temple shining out onto the town, onto the city, onto the streets there around them and Jesus speaking up saying, I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life. Now Jesus knew that all of us and we learn this from this part of his word and elsewhere too that one of the things that's happened to us when we rebelled against God as you find in Genesis chapter 3 is that we became darkened.

We became dark in our souls and in our minds and our understanding and so we need the light that Jesus brings us, that Jesus is, to shine into our hearts.

For light to be newly created there so that we will know the light of God's truth. And you see what he's saying, whoever follows me will not walk in darkness.

[17 : 18] It's interesting, I'd chosen this one before this morning service led by Kenny High and he spoke about following and following Jesus. And here we are on the same emphasis here in terms of Jesus being the light of the world.

He's saying, whoever follows me will not walk darkness but will have the light of life. In other words, he's saying, follow me, put your trust in me and you will have the light of life.

I will give you light instead of the darkness that's in your soul as a sinner. I will give you the light, you see, he's saying the light of life, the eternal life that only Jesus can actually give us.

And you know something quite wonderful along with that. It's not just the fact that he will give us light so that we will have light then in our souls. We will have an understanding of ourselves and of God and of our need as we read the Bible.

That light of his truth will keep shining into our hearts. It's not just that. The fact is that Jesus, by following Jesus, Jesus actually makes us lights that will be like himself.

[18 : 36] And when Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he said, you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. In other words, every person that comes to know Jesus, by following Jesus, by placing their faith and trust in Jesus, by having Jesus as their saviour, Jesus makes them lights.

And the world that we live in, the world of darkness, of sin that we belong to, needs light. How does God provide light?

Well, not just through giving us the Bible, not just through giving us to belong to his church, but in making his people to be lights, miniatures, if you like, of Jesus himself.

The light of the world makes us to be light. In fact, he spoke in Matthew, in Matthew chapter 5 about Jesus, and Jesus spoke there to the people then in the Sermon on the Mount that he was in fact making them, or made them, you are, he said, the light of the world.

And where he said in chapter 6 of Matthew, sorry, chapter 5 of Matthew, where he actually said, you are the light of the world, a city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.

[19 : 59] You have it there in verse 14 of Matthew 5, you are the light of the world, a city set on a hill cannot be hidden, nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. So when you live as a Christian, whatever age you're at, you children, as you live as Christians who love God, who love the Word of God, what's happening is that you're giving out light to those around you to see the light of God's truth in you.

It's such an important thing for us to do. Let your light shine before other people so that they too may come to glorify God through your witness.

Now let's say the Lord's Prayer once again together. Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

[21 : 16] For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. Our second reading is the passage we're going to look at tonight, and it's in Ecclesiastes chapter 7, the book of Ecclesiastes chapter 7, and we'll begin now reading at verse 10.

Say not, why were the former days better than these? For it is not from wisdom that you ask this. Wisdom is good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun.

For the protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the advantage of knowledge is that wisdom preserves the life of him who has it. Consider the work of God, who can make straight what he has made crooked.

In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider. God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil doing.

[22 : 29] Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool.

Why should you die before your time? It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.

Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you.

Your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others. All this I have tested by wisdom. I said I will be wise, but it was far from me.

That which has been this far off, and deep, very deep, who can find it out? I turned my heart to know, and to search out, and to seek wisdom, and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly, and the foolishness that is madness.

[23 : 39] And I find something more bitter than death, the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her.

Behold, this is what I found, says the preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things, which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found.

One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

As we turn to this passage tonight, we pray that God will actually lead us through this passage and bless it to us as his own word of truth. Now I want to confess immediately that this is a difficult passage.

It was a real challenge and yet a privilege and a delight to try and study it in order to present it to you this evening. There's a great benefit in taking a book of the Bible and working your way through it, not necessarily verse by verse or theme by theme, but just taking a book like Ecclesiastes.

[24 : 56] But of course, the downside of that is you come to passages which are really difficult and you struggle through them, although having said that, you still benefit from that because you realise that you need God himself to guide you and to teach you through such passages of his word.

There are certain things that we can say of passages like this that are somewhat difficult and indeed aspects of them really beyond a proper grasp of what they're saying or certainly not have a certainty about some of the verses and what they mean.

But you're always looking for, let's say, a thread running through a passage, a thread that works its way through the various verses of a passage and indeed there is a thread here.

You can see the thread here is actually wisdom. wisdom. If you look at verse 10, in fact it's mentioned before that we saw last time, he speaks about wisdom and of the wise and at verse 10 there, we didn't look at verse 10 last time, but he's saying, say not, why were the former days better than these?

For it is not from wisdom that you ask that. In other words, he's actually saying what we always ourselves say, it's not as good now as it used to be. The old days were better.

[26 : 14] It was better in the church's experience 20 years, 40 years, 50 years ago. And what God is teaching him here is not from wisdom that we say that, because actually in some ways these days are better than they were.

And you're always going to find that we have a tendency to look through what's usually called rose tinted spectacles as we look to the past, as if everything then was better than it is now.

And here is Solomon or the writer, if it was Solomon, saying it's not from wisdom that you say this, why were the former days better than these? Because there's always good and bad in every generation.

And so the wisdom that he mentions there then runs through the rest of the chapter. And what you find is that he talks here about the benefits of wisdom, and of course wisdom is not human ingenuity, it's not just having a great intellect.

wisdom is describes the life that follows God's truth, that accepts God's truth and applies that to life, and therefore looks at all the situations that you come across in your life and your experience from the perspective of God's truth being your guide.

[27 : 31] That is what makes us wise. And the wisdom that he mentions here as he works through the chapter is a wisdom that has many benefits. verses 11 and 12 there, it's good with an inheritance, an advantage to those who see the sun.

In other words, he's saying if you have an inheritance, you come into the possession, let's say of great wealth or property or real estate. If you don't have wisdom, you can very easily squander it.

So wisdom is an advantage, it protects you and your life and it's something that actually gives you a very considerable advantage over people who are not guided by the truth of God and therefore are not wise in that sense.

But then you see, wisdom has its limitations and that's what he also includes in these verses. Verse 23, for example, all this I have tested by wisdom.

I said I will be wise. He's searching for wisdom, for the meaning of life, for a purpose to life. But he said it was far from me, he said, that which has been is far off and deep, very deep, who can find it out?

[28 : 39] In other words, he's saying I tried to apply the wisdom I had, I sought more wisdom, I looked to grow and increase in my wisdom and still I'm forced to come to the point where I have to say my wisdom is limited.

I can't understand everything even as someone who relies on God to teach me. And so wisdom, good as it is, has its limitations. And that is especially the case when wisdom meets with God's sovereignty.

When wisdom meets with God's sovereignty, look at verse 13. Consider the work of God, who can make straight what he has made crooked.

And if you hang on to that verse, we'll take it with us into the rest of the chapter and we'll look at this under two main headings tonight. First of all, keeping in mind wisdom and the sovereignty of God, we'll first of all see how this passage shows that wisdom accepts the sovereignty of God.

Or it is through wisdom, through being taught by God's truth, that we come to accept his sovereignty. Wisdom accepts the sovereignty of God.

[29 : 52] Secondly, wisdom acknowledges the sinfulness of man. Verse 20, especially, surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

In other words, however wise you're going to be and however much you may come across someone much wiser than yourself, that man's not going to be perfect, that woman's not going to be perfect. They're still going to be sinners in some respect.

And that relates to some of the things we'll find in some of the verses. Now I'm not going to look at all the details and as I say there are some verses that are really very difficult to know exactly what the writer meant.

But let's look at wisdom and how wisdom accepts the sovereignty of God. And that's through firstly in God's arrangement of life. Let's just read verses 13 to 15.

Consider the work of God. Who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful and in the day of adversity consider. God has made the one as well as the other so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

[31 : 00] In my vain life I have seen everything there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil doing.

That is God's arrangement he's saying of human life as we find it as we look at things under the sun. Now when he's saying here who can make straight what he has made crooked the emphasis there is not so much on something that's sinful something that's morally corrupt when he speaks using the word crooked there as a word which can mean just having something twisted or turned around or put upside down and what the writer is dealing with is really the twists and the turns of life the things that affect everybody whether we're Christians or otherwise there are certain common experiences in all human life and what he's looking at as he's trying to observe and grow in his wisdom and find something of a meaning and a purpose to human life what he's saying is well God has actually made the one as well as the other there are certain things that are straight certain things that are twisted and turned the ups and downs of life you might say the joys combined with the sorrows and accompanied by the sorrows as we go through life that's what we're very much aware of it's not all plain sailing it's not a level path there are twists and turns and ups and downs but they're God's arrangement he's saying

God has made the one as well as the other you can see how this leads to the likes of Romans 8 where Paul is saying for those who love God all things work together for good to those who are called according to his purpose this is really what the writer here in Ecclesiastes is saying all things have to be taken together you can't just sift out the bits that you understand or the bits that appeal to yourself or the bits that you find comfort from you take it all together the twists and the turns the crooked and the straight the things in life that you find in your daily experience what he is saying here consider this who can make straight what he has made crooked and of course it's the same the other way who can make crooked what God has made straight what he is emphasizing is that this is the work of God this is the government of God this is the sovereignty of God and the wisdom of

God himself but our wisdom is a wisdom that God gives us to accept his sovereignty his right to rule these things of life and along with this emphasis on the straight and the crooked there is also in verse 15 what you might call an apparent unfairness in God's arrangement there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in evil doing it seems to be contrary to even to God's covenant promises in the Old Testament that if people lived in obedience to him then the promise was they would live long in the land and here is the writer saying well that's not always the case so how can I understand this there seems to be something there of an apparent unfairness why is it this way with someone not others so God's arrangement of life is something that we need wisdom for and we need wisdom so that we can see that it is his arrangement we cannot actually change what he has himself appointed we can't make straight what he has made crooked or twisted the twists and turns of life are not in our control and with wisdom we accept the sovereignty of God in that but what is the response to that well the response you find in verses 14 down through the passage there especially down in verse 14 to 18 he says in the day of prosperity be joyful and in the day of adversity consider

God has made the one as well as the other in other words the wise person treats prosperity and adversity alike knowing that God has made that arrangement it's the same thing as the crooked and straight prosperity and adversity together God has made one as well as the other but you see what he then says is so that man may not find out anything that will be after him that's a blow to our pride isn't it because what he's really looking for of course is a meaning to life searching for purpose in human life taking account of all these twists and turns and still asking the question is there any purpose in this and his conclusion is yes there is from God's point of view this is not a random arrangement these things in your life and mine prosperity adversity they're not they're just as if God had just thrown them together any old way as if he hadn't given thought to this and to your needs and to my needs and to the needs of the people we belong to or the world indeed

[36 : 18] God has made the one as well as the other so that man may not find out anything that will be after him in other words God's purpose in this arrangement of life is so that knowing we cannot control the future we will instead depend upon himself it's very obvious that we cannot control the future we don't know what tomorrow is going to bring let alone what this week is going to bring we cannot actually foresee very accurately some of the things that take place in the world and this COVID-19 is a prime example of that who could have actually thought and predicted we would be in this situation today who could have possibly seen that far to say this is how it's actually going to be for all of these months in 2020 we don't have that ability one of the things we pray for as we start to pray for tonight is that God will make us wise to accept that because one of the things we love to have as fallen sinners is a sense of controlling our own lives and controlling our own destiny and being in charge of the things of our daily life and of whatever may follow that but here is the writer saying you can't do that you know you can't do that you know that that's an impossibility and because you know that's an impossibility what is the alternative well it is to depend upon God you all know

I'm sure Joni Erickson Teda who wrote some wonderful books following her own accident through which she was paralysed and in one of her books this is what she's saying I came across this quote really and it fits in with the point we've just been looking at in the day of prosperity be joyful the day of adversity considered God has made one as well as the other so that man may not find out anything that will be after and this is what she says only God is capable of telling us what our rights and needs are only God is capable of telling us what our rights and our needs are because only he knows them perfectly therefore she says you have to surrender this right to him the right to control your own life the right to know what's good and what's best for you when it's true that you cannot control your own life you have to surrender the right you have to surrender the desire to do that to God himself and isn't that what we do when we hand our life over to

Jesus when you come to realize that at whatever point of life you've come to realize it that you just cannot manage your life you cannot be the manager of your own destiny you can't even manage tomorrow neither can I so you hand it over to Jesus who can and who does you give your life into his hands you think of him feeding the multitude of the five thousand with the tiny amount of bread and fish that he had to begin with no wonder the disciples were amazed where are we going to get enough to feed this multitude bring them he said here to me bring these resources to me and when they put them into Christ's hands what did he do with them he multiplied them so they fed the five thousand and there was all that much left over as well the twelve baskets full not only he can do that the thing is he can do that with your life and mine too you hand that over to him in adversity in prosperity and you know sometimes we think that it's far more difficult to handle adversity than it is prosperity it's not actually it's a very very difficult thing to be wise when you've got plenty and what

God is saying to us here is consider the work of God and consider it in a way that accepts his sovereignty so they treat prosperity the wise treat prosperity and adversity alike but in responding to the sovereignty of God they also do this they avoid two extremes verses 15 to 18 we find the writer doing this I have seen everything he says a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil doing that's something you come across every day why should well let's take the example of an example of let's imagine a young Christian mother who has young children and she dies of cancer and you find a hardened criminal who's never regretted anything in his life who spent most of his life in and out of jail and that person continues well into ripe old age why why should there be such a difference between a righteous person who dies young and a sinful person who goes on living in his unrighteousness in his sin in his evil doing how do you respond to that well by avoiding these two extremes because the first possibility is that you be overly righteous in other words

I think what he's saying here is that one of the possible responses to what he's setting out in this scenario is that we would then say to ourselves well the one thing I'm going to do above everything else in order to be really approved of by God in order to meet with God's favour I am going to be super righteous I'm going to be as righteous as I can possibly be I'm going to look to being righteous more than anything else and what he's saying is don't do that because that leads to self-righteousness that's what the Pharisees did didn't they in Jesus' day they weren't satisfied with having the Ten Commandments they added all their own rules and regulations along with these and condemned people who broke their rules and their regulations even though sometimes they themselves weren't even keeping the Ten Commandments in other words they were trying to be super righteous better than everybody else putting themselves on a pinnacle of righteousness that's not what life's about now this doesn't conflict with pursuing holiness and seeking to live a holy life of course but in doing that as verse 21 or verse 20 puts it we have to come to the point where we say we cannot make ourselves super righteous because we're still faced with the problem of sin there isn't a person in the world that is so righteous that they never sin you see what it's like when you focus on yourself when you focus so much on yourself and your attempt to be super righteous not only do you actually end with self righteousness but you also are in danger of entering into perfectionism which has always been a problem in the church perfectionism well here he's saying your response to this kind of thing that you see in life not to be overly righteous or to make yourself too wise because you're always going to have limitations on the other hand don't be overly wicked neither be a fool when you know that this is the case that you can't understand life that you find these anomalies in life these discrepancies in life these differences the crooked and the straight don't go to the other extreme and just throw it all away and say well I'm just going to live my own life

[44 : 23] I'm going to just live as I please I'm going to follow the ways of pleasure and of sin whatever God says whatever the church says whatever the gospel says that's how I'm going to live my life nobody's going to tell me whether it's wrong or right sinful or righteous I'm just going to do it and forget about anything trying to be righteous or holy or any of that stuff don't be overly wicked neither be a fool that's the foolishness of the human heart that says well it's impossible really and anyway I find a lot of things in these Christians that I can criticise I can see things that are inconsistent in their lives they claim to be God's people but look at the sin in their lives look at the things they're doing which really they should not be doing you know that reaction don't you know that kind of view that the world takes but here he's saying it's not actually at all a balance between just a little bit of righteousness and a little bit of sinfulness that's not what he's saying he's not saying well don't do too much in the way of righteousness but don't do too much on the way of sin or evil either what he's saying is be true to

God follow his word and his wisdom and his truth be wise in the way that he himself would have you to walk by complying by loving his law in other words the fear of God we've seen it mentioned here as well the one who fears God shall come out from both of these extremes they won't be taken in by these extremes the fear of God keeps you in the right path and remember the fear of God is not being afraid of God that's not what it means it means having the kind of respect in love for God that wants to actually live the way that he sets out for you what he's saying is wisdom accepts the sovereignty of God accepting the sovereignty of God means accepting the straight and the crooked in the arrangement that God has of our lives we treat prosperity and adversity alike they're all arranged by

God for us they're both arranged by God and all that's within them and we avoid these two extremes you don't go to the extreme of super righteousness or the extreme of just forgetting about it altogether you just give your life and your mind and your heart to Jesus and let him lead you and follow him and his sovereign control the second thing more briefly wisdom acknowledges the sinfulness of man and it's a sinfulness firstly he mentions that's universal surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins and he adds to that verse 21 do not take to heart all the things that people say lest you hear your servant cursing you your heart knows that many times you have cursed others yourself in other words what he's saying is there's such a universal sinfulness a sinfulness that applies to each and every individual every human individual even the best

Christian the best saint tonight on earth is actually still affected in some ways by sin and what he's saying in verse 21 is be careful about this our tendency is to make requirements for others stricter than we would have for ourselves and we've all been there we condemn sin in other people and then we realise that that I'm doing the same myself we condemn pride in other people we don't see the pride in our own hearts as clearly we condemn people for being such and such and then we look into our own hearts and say well I'm not any better and this is what he's saying don't take to heart all that people say about you lest you hear your servant cursing you see what he's saying the picture is of a master who has a servant and he overhears the servant saying bad things about the master and so he dismisses him say well that's it get out

I don't want you in a servant anymore but your heart knows many times you have cursed others you've done the same yourself and nobody has dismissed you so let's be careful how we actually think of others speak of others conclude about others because there's a universal sinfulness in which we are all implicated even though God forgives our sin he doesn't remove it entirely from our daily experience the second thing in acknowledging the sinfulness of man is what we can call seduction by folly seduction by folly verses 26 there to 28 he said I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things the way things are arranged and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness and I find something more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters he who pleases

[49 : 54] God he scapes her but the sinner is taken by her now he's not talking here about a specific woman it's a picture of a prostitute picture of someone who seeks to seduce others as you find in prostitution but when you go to the book of Proverbs you'll find something very similar a number of times especially chapter 7 and also chapter 9 and what he does what the writer of Proverbs does is picture wisdom and foolishness or folly as two women he's not despising women he's not saying that it's because women are what they are this is why I've chosen them to illustrate what he's saying is the picture of wisdom is a beautiful elegant woman that is that goes about her business in a wise way the picture of folly or foolishness is the temptress the prostitute the person who actually lives in that immoral lifestyle and he says here the woman folly in verse 10 chapter 10 sorry chapter 9 of Proverbs the woman folly is loud she's seductive and knows nothing she sits at the door of her house she takes a seat on the highest places of the town calling to those who pass by who are going straight on their way stolen water is sweet and bread eaten and secret is pleasant but he does not know that the dead are there and that her guests are in the depths of hell or death you see what he's doing is he's using the imagery of the prostitute the woman the immoral woman and he's saying that's foolishness and what he's doing in Ecclesiastes here the writer in Ecclesiastes is doing is when you think about foolishness and you personify that foolishness that just doesn't take care of life properly that puts

God aside that doesn't want to actually listen to what God is saying that wants to live your own life in the way that sinners do what he's saying to us is remember temptation is powerful that is folly the woman folly the picture of folly the issue that is folly the powerful thing that folly is that foolishness is remember Satan is very much behind folly he's not completely in charge of it but nevertheless he uses it and Satan's bait is folly foolishness persuading people that they can do without God you see that's what that's what he persuades like this woman here who's meant this picture of this wicked woman this immoral woman folly he says is like that and that's true to life most people don't end up as drug addicts or addicted to pornography or sex or to gambling by just having taken it up entirely as in a moment no no you begin with a little taste and Satan says go on have a taste it's not going to harm you it's not going to do you any harm whatsoever you can live with it you can handle it whether it's drink or drugs or pornography sex or gambling that's how it very often begins and it ends up with people getting hooked sadly and these excesses and what

Ecclesiastes is reminding us of is that wisdom pays attention to the sinfulness of our hearts pays attention to the fact that folly at the heart of folly is temptation and temptation will lead you to disaster if you give into it if you actually don't follow the wisdom that God sets out for us and so the response of the wise person to folly is when folly calls for your attention when folly calls to you and says look come on eat what I've got to provide never mind that gospel stuff I can give you better than that you go back to Proverbs 7 and this is what the writer there says my son keep my words treasure up my commandments with you keep my commandments and live keep my teaching as the apple of your eye in other words as you preserve and as you protect your eye from anything damaging it so he says my teaching wisdom protect it treasure it bind it he says on your fingers write them on the tablet of your heart say to wisdom you are my sister and call insight your intimate friend to keep you from the forbidden woman from folly from the adulteress with her smooth words here's

Ecclesiastes following on there from Proverbs books that are so filled with practical wisdom and remember Paul in writing to the Corinthians as well the Corinthians were notorious for sexual depravity notorious even then in their own age what does he say to the church in Corinth in 2nd Corinthians chapter 7 verse 1 he says therefore beloved having these promises the promises that God attaches to faithful following of him to resisting temptation having these promises dearly beloved let us having these promises let us then put sin aside let us fear the Lord and live in accordance with what he himself would have us to live by let us perfect holiness in the fear of God and so there's the seduction that folly is guilty of the seduction that you need to avoid the wisdom that acknowledges and pays heed to the sinfulness of our hearts but then finally he brings us to the source of the problem verse 29 you see he's saying see this alone I found that God made man upright but they that's human beings they have sought out many schemes many schemes for themselves there's a clear link of course there to

Genesis chapter 1 2 3 especially the creation and the fall of man but what he's saying here is God did not make man sinful when we were created we were not created as sinners God made man upright in other words for all that you find of sinfulness in our human life and lifestyle the blame is not attached to God many schemes have been sought out by humans that's what makes the world a sinful place that's why it is full of darkness and ungodliness and you can see that in the pattern even the schemes over the first chapters of Genesis itself what you find you find a woman first of all Eve looking at the fruit of the forbidden tree and what does it say she saw that it was a tree to be desired to make one wise yes human wisdom replacing God's wisdom so she took of it and she gave to her husband and then you find these devastating words words that left the legacy of sin on all his descendants apart from

[57 : 46] Jesus and he ate and he ate that's the moment of darkness entering human experience that's the moment of sin taking a grip of a human soul but then as you go on through Genesis you find that God deals with things in a certain way chapter 6 you come to God's declaration there that the thoughts and imaginings of man's heart was just evil continually and difficult theology but it says that God regretted that he had made man on the earth what did he do he sent a flood the flood that destroyed the world apart from Noah and those on the ark and did that cure things of course not because you go to chapter 11 and after all of the flood and the aftermath has been dealt with what do you find human beings doing they're still scheming what they're doing is let's build a tower that reaches into heaven let's do this so that we won't be scattered on the face of the earth let's actually have this scheme to protect ourselves that's the fallen human heart that's fallen human thinking that's lack of proper wisdom that is the folly that lurks in our souls let's do it without

God that's the folly of our present society by and large that's the folly of worldly thinking that's the folly that says listen to what I have to say folly is appealing to us today you can do it without God you're better doing it without God religion is just a sham especially the Christian stuff here is wisdom for us God made man upright but they have sought out many schemes the root of the problem is in our own souls and that's why we need to be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God now then just to close how do you get from here to Jesus where is the line where is the connection we always try to look for one even if Jesus isn't specifically mentioned where do you have a line from here to Jesus well think of

Jesus in terms of God's arrangement of his life God the father arranged the life that he would live in this world and he came willingly into that life and took it and that wasn't a straight life it had the crooked the twists the turns the ups the downs and Jesus lived that life and he accepted that life he accepted the will of the father for that life what do you find in Gethsemane you find in Gethsemane Jesus prostrate on the ground father if it be possible let this cup pass from me this cup this most twisted of cups this most agonizing of cups this death that he had to face on the cross that he had to die on the cross that he had to accomplish on the cross what is he saying when he said father if it be possible let this cup pass from me yet not my will but thine be done he is saying father is it not possible and if it is at all possible straighten it out for me don't leave the twistedness of death in it for me if it's possible can it not be straight and a bit and of course the response the answer to that is no not now it will be straightened for

Jesus when he takes his place again at the father's right hand and sits there having accomplished everything he came to do the road is now straight there are no twists and turns left in it he's done it he's accomplished it and that's how it must be for you and for me as well in following him the same principle of accepting the sovereignty of God acknowledging the sinfulness that we ourselves have but also accepting that as God is working in our lives what we're seeing at the moment is just a little tiny bit of the embroidery with which he is making up the tapestry of your life and mine you're seeing it from beneath you're seeing it with all the threads hang loose and you can't see the other side where the proper embroidered pattern is being created by God but one day you'll see it and

Johnny again puts it this way we will stand amazed to see the top side of the tapestry and how God beautifully embroidered each circumstance into a pattern for our good and his glory isn't that a wonderful way of putting it we will see how God beautifully embroidered each circumstance of our life into a pattern for our good and his glory amen may he bless his word to us we're going to conclude now singing psalm 93 psalm 93 in the sing psalms version on page 123 and we're singing this time to a tune bishop thorpe the lord is king his throne endures majestic in its height the lord is robed in majesty and armed with strength and might and so on to the end of the psalm at verse 5 your royal statutes lord stand firm unchanging is your word the lord is king his throne endures the lord is king his throne endures majesty in his height the lord is robed in majesty and armed with strength and might the world is founded firm and strong rebirth it cannot be your throne is strong and you are gone from all eternity the seas o lord have lifted up they lifted up their voice the seas have lifted up their waves and made a mighty noise the lord enthroned on highest strong more more powerful is he than thunder of the ocean's waves are breakers of the sea sea your royal statutes lord stand firm and changing is your word and holiness adorn adorn your house for endless days o lord now may the grace of the lord jesus christ the love of god the father and the communion of the holy spirit be with you now and evermore amen

[67 : 00] thank you so much again for joining with us in worship tonight i trust that by the holy spirit's blessing god's word was blessed to your soul this evening and i pray that god will keep you all safe and well during these difficult days thank you thank you