

God stands with us

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[0 : 00] Oh, you think you know him? Suddenly you get surprised by a whole different tune. That was lovely, thank you. So see, we're looking at Ecclesiastes 9, the end of chapter 9 and chapter 10 tonight.

If you want to turn to that and follow along. I'm very grateful to John Lowry for the work that he's done preaching through Ecclesiastes, and especially for his empathy towards me a couple of weeks ago, when he looked forward to this evening's passage, and he understood the challenge of this passage.

As he said, there's not really a clear thread running through it. However, I know that God has something to teach us. I appreciated your empathy, John.

If I go off down a few rabbit holes, please forgive me this evening. But there's something rich and relevant that I hope will come through as we consider God's word together.

I'm reading from Ecclesiastes 9 and verse 13. I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me. There was once a small city with only a few people in it, and a powerful king came against it, surrounded it, and built huge siege works against it.

[1 : 29] Now there lived in that city a man, poor but wise. And he saved the city by his wisdom, but nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, wisdom is better than strength.

But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded. The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools.

Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. How would you like to be remembered?

Would you like to be remembered at all? The writer, as has been said probably, Solomon, I'm grateful for the work you've done through that as well, John. The writer recounts a story here. Perhaps it's parabolic of a small city. Besiege a huge siege waged against it. The situation is hopeless.

[2 : 34] A wise scheme was dreamt up by an unnamed wise man. We don't know what clever employed, but it worked.

The siege was broken. The city was saved. As unaware of the clever solution as we are of the wise man who envisaged.

Perhaps that's the point. Perhaps we're not meant to know either the strategy or who the wise man to be celebrated. The saviour of the city.

A parade, perhaps an annual parade. A holiday in his name. Statues built of him. Civic buildings, libraries, town squares, remembering him, commemorating their victory.

Won't thanks to his guile and cunning. Doesn't even tell us his name. He has forgotten. His wisdom. Is that what we're like?

[3 : 36] As people. Do we fail to recognise true wisdom? Do we fail? We have plenty of statues of worthy men in this city.

It's almost always men. Do we fail to recognise true wisdom? Do we fail to recognise true wisdom? And civic buildings named for men of historic renown. But do we recognise, remember men of wisdom?

Edinburgh was the centre of the enlightenment. And the heart formation. I was really delighted to hear that wee, watch that wee video this morning. Knowing that I was going to be having a...

So Edinburgh is the heart of the theology of the Reformation. It's said sometimes that in Europe and corrected in Edinburgh. I don't agree with that, but it's a nice thought.

That's an interpretation of Solomon's words here. We have a statue of David Hume. In John Locke's house, just a little further down the Royal Mile. And a statue of him in St. Giles Cathedral as well.

[4 : 44] Perhaps the most dramatic and symbolic structure in Edinburgh's skyline. Perhaps we do remember the wise men to what they said. Now, it's arguable that David Hume's philosophy was the antithesis of Christian.

Hume's ideas are better forgotten in a place like this. But isn't that the problem? For every thought, we have a thesis and an antithesis.

It's very hard to get your tongue around that. We disagree with someone. We reduce it. And we stay safe in our little echo chamber of agreeable ideas.

The wisdom of others. Nowadays, we call it a cancel culture. A new term. But apparently, it's an idea that the wise man in Solomon's parable was cancelled.

Despite the good that he did. Our society, the nation of the book, as Scotland was once called, has become the nation of Facebook.

[5 : 51] The shoeing wisdom of the videos of cats. Even if you don't agree with the theology of Knox. And the wonderful thing about theology is that it shows and it reveals more and more of the God that we worship and adore.

Every new facet of infinite incredibleness and awesomeness. Even if you don't agree with John Knox. That he was filled with the Holy Spirit.

And led. Filled by the Spirit. For that time and in that place. Should give every one of us calm. Just in case you're unsure of what Knox believed in.

What he preached. I'll give you a very brief synopsis. Knox. Firstly, Bible-based Christianity. Knox believed that Christianity should be based on and defended. It might seem obvious to you.

But a great deal of Christian understanding has been corrupted over the years by the church. And it had been taken the words of God and used them for its own ends.

[6 : 51] I think sometimes there are places to see that kind of thing happening. Luther, who we heard today, said, Sola Scriptura, or Scripture alone, Reformation.

It's like a breakaway from religious dogma and superstition. And a return to the truth of God's Word. I'm not a very religious person. Whenever I meet someone or I used to meet them and tell them that I was a pastor, they would often respond, Very religious.

Neither am I, I would reply. They would look confused. And I would explain to them that rather than driven by religion, I am driven by faith. What's the difference?

Religion is, I think, what we do. It's the stuff. It's the structure. It's the ceremony. It's everything we place around the things that we believe.

It's piety. It's dressing up. It's putting on a show. I'm not really exercised by such things. They have their place, but I trust in Jesus.

[7 : 55] It's the thing that we've seen throughout Ecclesiastes, that in the midst of sometimes random ups and downs in life, the peaks and troughs that we all know and go through, in the midst of all of that, God is sovereign.

God is imminent. And God is reliable. Knox believed in the separation of church and state. He believed that both should be separate, but both should be responsible to God.

This idea culminated in the century after Knox died with the Covenanters right here in Edinburgh, who essentially believed that no king, no earthly king should be head of the church, only Jesus.

And there was a pushback against the state interfering in the business of church. And I understand the opposition to that. We should remember that what we ought to be doing is work both ways.

We don't expect the state to do the bidding of the church either. Often we push back against the state interfering in what we do, but we want to have our fingers in what they do as well.

[9 : 13] It works both ways. Knox believed that worship should be a community activity.

Worship should glorify God. Worship involves prayers, preaching, singing, psalms. That's how he would have seen it. And Knox believed that any material representation or veneration of God was idolatry.

So you had a thing called iconoclasm in the Reformation. They went around smashing anything that they believed or they saw was some material representation or veneration of God.

some real top-notch vandalism took place. If you go down to the old town, even today, and you look up at the windows around the Royal Mile and off the streets of the Royal Mile, you can often see those windows, small diamond panes of glass.

Those at one time would have been stained glass, but they were smashed. They were destroyed during the Reformation in the fervor of iconoclasm, smashing anything material that represented

God, from stained glass and statues to musical instruments like church organs.

[10:32] It's interesting to me how austere some churches remain. And of course, the free church continues in the tradition of singing psalms unaccompanied. This little aside, I hope, speaks into some of the wisdom to be gleaned from Ecclesiastes.

When David Hume separates reason from faith, as many would do today, Ecclesiastes brings wisdom, righteousness, and godliness together.

One leads to another. They are inseparable. As we read in Proverbs 1 and verse 7, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Ecclesiastes 9 ends with a typical downbeat kind of duality. It says, Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

And that's a thread that runs right through Ecclesiastes, the inescapable and unpalatable truth that we never learn. We never learn. We are doomed to make the same mistakes over and over again.

[11:46] We look to the loudest, the most apparently strong, the most outwardly successful. We listen to them at the expense of the wiser but poorer, more lowly person.

For all the good the wise do, we return continually to the foolish, the sinful, and the good that they've done is lost. I think there's something very relevant about that in our country today.

We have leaders who espouse wisdom, but seem to take on foolish, in my opinion, actions.

I'm thinking about our health service, which is incredible, a beautiful thing, an incredible, generous community act where everybody put in together and took out as they had need.

And yet the foolishness that's pulling that apart at the moment is to the detriment of all of us. We return to the foolish and the sinful, and the good is lost.

[13:01] Christopher Wright, in his book on Ecclesiastes, talks about this duality that's at the heart of Israel's wisdom literature.

He says that you have to choose wisdom or folly. Israel's faith encourages us, obviously, to choose wisdom. This duality is constantly put before us throughout the wisdom literature.

Wise or foolish, righteous or wicked, godly or ungodly. The writer sees a strong connection between the intellectual, moral, and spiritual dimensions of life.

It's a holistic view. One cannot, however much one wishes, separate the intellectual and the moral from the spiritual. I think this gives us a really healthy worldview.

It gives meaning to our morality and weight to our intellect. Academic learning leads to ethical behavior and religious faith.

[14:11] You see, there's a suspicion in our culture of academics, of experts. We heard about this, this idea that what do experts know anyway? I first understood this during the lengthy Brexit debates in this country.

Experts, we were told, were not to be trusted. The felt experiences of people were what mattered. Facts were less trustworthy than what you felt was true.

Everyone did that which they felt was right in their own eyes. You can see that today. If you watch what's going on in the US during their election campaigns.

It's not the truth that matters. The truth can be ignored. It's what you perceive to be the truth that counts. This is a dangerous situation that we find ourselves in.

Proverbs 9 verse 10 says, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. I'm going to quote the guy that I read Christopher Wright here directly.

[15:24] He writes, This is why we, the fear of the Lord is the first principle of wisdom. We need to know what to believe which comes from knowing whom to trust. And that's foundational for then knowing how to think because God shapes our whole worldview and mental categories.

And on the basis of that combination of God-focused faith and reason, we will then know how to behave. And it's in our relationship with the living God in the fear of the Lord that we receive God's guidance in all three areas.

The fear of the Lord will shape our lives into the ways of wisdom, righteousness, and godliness and will help us to avoid their opposites, the ways of folly, wickedness, and ungodliness.

Some of these ideas are examined in chapter 10. Chapter 10 reflects the political and social landscape, how we are governed, how we are ruled over, and how we live our lives under whatever regime we find ourselves in.

It's interesting to me. We spend so much time and money, so many words and thoughts and argument and debate about this party or that party, socialist, conservative, liberal, democratic,

constitutional, whatever system or philosophy you care to consider, but these words in Ecclesiastes, these words that we're going to read are relevant to them all.

[16:56] Does anything ever really change? Does it make any difference because when I read these words, they are relevant whether we're thinking about a Labour government or a Conservative one, a Unionist state or an independent country?

Ecclesiastes 10, verse 1, As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour. The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left.

Even as fools walk along the road, they lack sense and show everyone how stupid they are. If a ruler's anger rises against you, do not leave your post. Calmness can lay great offences to rest.

There is an evil I have seen under the sun, the sort of error that arises from a ruler. Fools are put in many high positions while the rich occupy the low ones.

I have seen slaves on horseback while princes go on foot like slaves. As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour.

[18:04] This is a universal truth. It doesn't take much to ruin good things. One bad apple, as the proverb has it.

And sometimes our emotions are a bit like that. We could receive a hundred compliments. We could receive praise for whatever good thing we've done that's successful and yet one insult, one put down will cut us to the core.

One negative comment will take away all our confidence. We'll focus with laser precision on that one negative thing that we've heard or understood.

We'll disregard all the positive things, all the good things, all the encouraging things. Sometimes it's one character flaw that might ruin our lives.

We might be accomplished in many things, successful, given high regard, and yet one character flaw can bring us down. The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left.

[19:16] I've seen this verse taken out of context recently. Has anyone else seen that? On social media and other pits like that. It's been used in electioneering in the US.

The heart of the wise inclines to the right but the heart of the fool to the left. That is absolutely not what that verse means. We have to be wary of that kind of misuse of scripture.

That verse speaks again to the dualism that we've seen throughout chapter 9. The heart of the fool inclines to the left, refers to the left being seen in tradition as evil. Now, I have to be very careful here.

I'm married to a left-handed person. Two of my sons are left-handed. I remain outnumbered at home as a right-handed person. Quite unusual. The Latin for left is sinister.

I don't know if you know that. The Latin for left is sinister. The left has long been associated with evil going back centuries, millennia.

[20:17] Not my wife and sons, though. They are lovely. When we see the heart of the fool inclines to the left, it means inclines to evil. Verses 3 to 7 speak of the sometimes topsy-turvy nature of governance.

You can't rely on rulers to do what's right. to make right decisions, to act in righteousness. You can't rely on governments to do what's right.

You can't rely on anyone, maybe, to do what's right. Because all of us have our own agenda, our own sense of right. All of us are driven by maybe our own base desires and needs.

What we can do is be aware, remain calm, don't be surprised, even when what you see and experience defies logic or feels unjust.

Verse 8, whoever digs a pit may fall into it. Whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake. Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them. Whoever splits logs may be endangered by them.

[21:32] If the axe is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed, but skill will bring success. If a snake bites before it's charmed, the charmer receives no fee.

These verses reveal another truth. While we are responsible for our actions, they are no guarantee of success or righteousness. Digging a pit and breaking through a wall refer to evil acts, and the writer tells us that they may have negative consequences.

consequences. But then, what the writer describes as good acts, quarrying stones, and splitting logs, may result in negative consequences too. We have no way of knowing what the consequences of our actions will be.

It's not entirely random. A dull-edged axe requires more strength and skill will bring success, but there's enough of a random factor for consequences that demonstrates that we can't rely on our own skills, we can't rely on our own strength in life.

Verse 12, words from the mouth of the wise are gracious, but fools are consumed by their own lips. At the beginning their words are folly, at the end they are wicked madness, and fools multiply words.

[22 : 52] No one knows what's coming, who can tell someone else what will happen after them. The toil of fools wearies them, they do not know the way to town, woe to the land whose king was a servant, and whose princes feast in the morning.

Blessed is the land whose king is of noble birth, and whose princes eat at a proper time, for strength and not for drunkenness. Through laziness thereafter sag, because of idle hands the house leaks. A feast is made for laughter, wine makes merry, and money is the answer for everything. Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird in the sky may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say.

These verses continue the themes that we've picked up, the duality of wisdom or folly. It develops the idea to warn that foolish words end in wicked madness, and that foolishness is exhausting, it is confusing, and eventually the fool will be so lost that they won't even know their way home.

There are warnings in these verses against laziness and drunkenness, an appeal to leaders who lead by example, whose righteousness and wisdom benefit their subjects.

[24 : 17] Again, we see the duality of life choices at work. There's a kind of nihilistic cynicism in verse 19, a feast is made for laughter, wine makes life merry, and money is the answer for everything.

I think we should regard that as a warning. It's easy to be drawn into believing that a life of pampered luxury, a life of massive wealth would bring satisfaction, but it's a wicked lie.

There are countless examples of miserable, rich people. Fame and fortune do not bring satisfaction. If anything, they bring an insatiable hunger for more, for more wealth, for more fame, for more power.

We've seen the news this last couple of weeks that testifies to all of that, all of the fame, all of the wealth, all of the high regard of men, did not bring satisfaction to that young man who fell out the window in South America, to Liam Payne.

and I think this is the key to our understanding of chapter 10. We can't rely on government.

[25 : 40] We can't rely on our own strength, on our own skills. We can hope for good government, and we can try to make good choices, but all we can rely on, in the end, is God.

Through the turmoil, through the upheaval of life, through the valleys, and on the mountaintops, God is with us, and God is in it with us.

It is God who brings revelation, wisdom, understanding, righteousness. righteousness. Ultimately, all we can do in response to that is to worship him.

The only valid response to knowing and seeing our awesome God is to give him his worth, to put God in his rightful place, at the center of our life, and magnify him, and edify him, and I'm very glad of that.

It might seem obvious, but it's the answer. It's the answer to all the problems of our life. It is the best that God offers, the best things with us.

[27 : 03] God enters into our lives, and God upholds us, and empathy. He offers reconciliation and restoration.

When humanity was lost to him, incarnate, not that he might know us, but that we might know him. He became incarnate flesh, God of suffering.

God stands with us in the Emmanuel, the anointed God in the person of Jesus. Makes sense of all the confusion of life, the disappointment, and he brings peace, healing, certainty, and assurance. Now that might seem very little disappointment in our lives, and yet it's not only the best that God has to offer, it is the best that God has to offer.

God can take away our choices. God can take away the risk, he can take away the randomness and misery. He could end injustice, he could end iniquity, he could deal with our broken humanity, but he doesn't.

[28 : 19] He does something far better. He becomes human, and he stands with us, offers us a better choice, to choose him, to choose righteousness and truth.

God makes sense of this senseless world, and assurance in the face of the randomness of this world. God brings wisdom and understanding of this world.

We can choose to stand with him, we can choose his way. Let's pray. Father God, I thank you that you do not leave humanity lost, hopeless, that you don't leave us struggling in the aftermath of the difficulties of life, of the randomness of illness or disease that we might face.

Father, you don't leave us abandoned, even in our foolishness and the consequences, but you stand with us, and you restore us, and you strengthen us, and you redeem us, and you replace our anxiety with peace and restoration.

Father, I thank you that you are the God who became flesh. flesh. You're the God who became flesh, so that we know that you know what it's like, that we know that you empathize in the difficulties of life, that you stand with us when we are on the mountaintops.

[30 : 07] Father God, you remain with us. You remain constant and true. You remain that solid rock. Father God, all we can do in response is give you our worship and our praise.

all we can do in response is dignify and lionize you. Father God, you are awesome. You are great and worthy to be praised.

You are saints. Father God, we stand in awe of you. Amen. Amen.