

Ecclesiastes: Everything is Vapour

“Growing in Wisdom”

Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

Delivered via Livestream at Central Baptist Church on March 22, 2020

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Before COVID-19 we started a book series through Ecclesiastes. Many of you have commented on how well this has prepared us to face our present situation. If you missed particularly the first four messages, go back and watch or listen to them. This book is all about how to understand and live in a world where nothing works the way it is supposed – where anxiety, troubles, and death are everywhere.
 - I feel like I should just re-preach them but I think we will continue on because there is still much in this book for us.
 - Today’s passage has some particular things that can help us to face the anxiety and difficulties of our present moment.
- Ecclesiastes is what we call wisdom literature. That is, writings that teach us how to live wisely.
 - There is a big difference between wisdom and knowledge. We have more knowledge today than at any other period in history but that does not mean we are wise. What is the difference?
 - Think of it this way. Is a tomato a fruit or a vegetable? It is a fruit. Now you have knowledge. But wisdom is different than knowledge. As one person has humorously put it: **(SHOW SLIDE) “Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit; wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.”** So, you see, knowledge is learning facts but wisdom is knowing how to work out those facts in the complex situations of life. Tomatoes may be fruit but the wise person will not mix them with strawberries and mangos. **(SHOW SLIDE – TITLE BACKGROUND)**
- Ecclesiastes is about helping us to grow in wisdom. We desperately need this for life is complex, puzzling, and often times, like right now, it defies comprehension.
 - For instance, how do we live faithfully as Christians when our society seems to move further away from the Bible’s beliefs and values? We need wisdom to navigate this.
 - Or, how do you think through your relationship with God when life feels so unfair and it seems like God isn’t doing anything to stop the evil in the world?
- How do we navigate all this? Solomon says we need to grow in wisdom.
 - Notice that he begins the chapter by praising the wise person. In verse 1 he asks, **“Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?”** Answer: no one is like the wise person. The wise person is the best of all people because, unlike the foolish person, the wise person can interpret complex situations in life and react rightly.
 - And then he says, **“A man’s wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.”** That is, a wise person’s wisdom can enable them to make choices that result in joy rather than sorrow.
- So, this chapter is about helping you become wise in how you relate to three specific things. Here Solomon helps us grow in wisdom by learning how to relate to those in authority (even when they abuse their power), to God (even when he seems unfair), and to circumstances (even when you can’t figure them all out).

- So, let's jump into the first one.

RELATING WISELY TO THOSE IN POSITIONS OF AUTHORITY

- **(SHOW SLIDE) First, grow in wisdom by learning how to relate to those in authority, (even when they abuse their power).**
 - In the first nine verses Solomon talks about how to be wise in relating to the king. He affirms that kings are sinners like everyone else (7:20) and in verse 9 he says kings can abuse their authority and hurt people. Since kings in the ancient world possessed near unlimited power, those who worked directly with the king had to be very wise in how they related to him.
 - We may not have this type of king anymore but this still applies directly to how we should relate to our government and to those in positions of authority. Growing in wisdom means two things.
- **(SHOW SLIDE) First, obey those in authority.**
 - He talks about this throughout the first nine verses but it is crystal clear in verse 2. **READ 2 - I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him.**
 - In other words, do what the king says. For your own health and safety, just obey and ask questions later. God's oath to the king could be the biblical idea that God has set rulers in place to work good in society or it could be that God's people are under oath from God to obey earthly rulers, even if they are the furthest thing from Christian.
- The New Testament teaches us the same thing. In Romans 13 Paul writes, **(SHOW SLIDE) "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. (SHOW SLIDE) ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. . . . (SHOW SLIDE) ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. (SHOW SLIDE) ⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed."**
 - In 1 Timothy 2:1-2 Paul writes, **(SHOW SLIDE) "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way."**
 - As Christians we are to be the very best citizens of our country and our city because we obey our government, the police, and the laws of the land. We are experiencing this right now as our government orders us to follow public health procedures for the good. We obey.
- But what about when they abuse their power? Growing in wisdom also means we **(SHOW SLIDE) Second, use caution when those in authority act in wrong ways.**
 - Look at verse 3. **READ 3 - Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases.** On the one hand he says to stay in the king's presence because leaving too quickly may make him angry. Yet, he also says that when the king is ordering something wrong you should not stay because to argue and stand against him will make him angry. So, which is it? In the words of that famous song, "Should I stay or should I go?" The wise person discerns the situation.

- Look at the second half of verse 5. **READ 5** *“The wise in heart will know the proper time and the just way”* to deal with the king’s commands. The point of this passage is to call people to obey the king but it also stresses that a person needs to act cautiously, carefully, and with wisdom because the king can bring great harm to you. Jesus said the same thing: **(SHOW SLIDE)** *“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Mt 10:16).*
- **(SHOW SLIDE – TITLE BACKGROUND)** I am not a prophet but it seems to me that relating wisely to our society and government will be one of the most important issues for the Church in the next few decades. I say this because our society not only continues to move away from Christian values and beliefs but it continues to embrace beliefs that are contrary to Christianity.
 - We could take a lot of time to apply this but I think the present situation is not about how to relate to a government that is abusing its power but rather how to relate to God and others when life is falling apart. So let’s leave this first point now and simply say this: growing in wisdom means relating well to those in authority by obeying them and by acting with caution when they begin to abuse their power so as not to unnecessarily provoke them.
 - Now Solomon brings up another area where we need to grow in wisdom.

LEARN HOW TO RELATE TO GOD

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Second, grow in wisdom by learning how to relate to God, even when he seems unfair.
 - **READ 10** - *Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is [hebel]”* Skip to verse 12. **READ 12** – *“a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life.”*
 - Solomon sees a guy who did a million wicked things and yet this guy lives a long life, is even welcomed at the temple, praised by others, and in the end, he received a proper burial and funeral. This is hebel. It is like a breath or smoke. You can’t grab onto this guy and stop him. He seems to just slip through the fingers of justice.
- It is situations like this that make people say, *“How is God just and fair? Why would we want to worship and follow a God that doesn’t even do anything about all the injustice in the world?”*
 - Here Solomon teaches us how to relate to God, even when he seems unfair. We learn two things.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, it will *not* end well for those who do not fear God.
 - Look at verse 13. **READ 13** - *it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.*
 - I remember talking with a brilliant young woman who was asking me about why God allows so much evil to take place in the world. She said, *“If he is so powerful, why doesn’t he just snap his fingers and end it all?”* I replied, *“Here is the good news. The Bible says that what you want will most certainly take place. One day God will snap his fingers and end it all, but just not yet.”* This makes you wise in relating to God. You need not despair. You need not fear

that he is unfair. A day of reckoning is coming. A day of judgement is coming. People will not get away with evil forever.

- **(SHOW SLIDE) Second, it will end well for those who do fear God.**
 - Look at verse 12. He says that even if a sinner commits the worst crimes and lives a long life, he will not give up on God. Why?
 - **READ 12b - yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him.** Here is hope. I am going to apply this in greater depth in the last point but for now just make a note of it.
 - Solomon now talks about one last area where we need to grow in wisdom.

LEARN HOW TO RELATE TO CIRCUMSTANCES

- **(SHOW SLIDE) Finally, grow in wisdom by learning how to relate to circumstances, even when you can't figure them all out.**
 - Verses 14 continues to deal with much of the same theme as the last point. Righteous people get what wicked people deserve and wicked people get what righteous people deserve.
 - Why does God allow these circumstances? They can drive us crazy as we try to figure out why this is the case. But Solomon says the wise person doesn't drive him or herself crazy trying to figure it all out.
- On the one hand you must **(SHOW SLIDE) accept the fact that you cannot figure out the reason for every circumstance.**
 - **READ 16-17 - When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, ¹⁷ then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.**
 - So don't drive yourself crazy trying to figure out why God allows this or that, why certain events like COVID-19 happen and others do not. Wisdom means letting God be God.
- On the other hand, we must **(SHOW SLIDE) enjoy the good circumstances God has given you.**
 - Once again, we see another one of Solomon's conclusions about enjoying the gifts God has given you in life. Look at verse 15. **READ 15 - And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.**
 - Again, we see this is not a book about how meaningless life is. It is about facing reality as it is and learning what it means to live wisely and with joy amidst the puzzling and often frustrating parts of life. Grow in wisdom by not stressing too much about all of God's ways. You cannot understand them anyways.
 - Accept that much of life is puzzling but that God will work it out in the end. At the same time, enjoy today for God has given this day as a gift.
 - ILL - Friday around 9:30pm – feeling the stress of all this. Praying and talking through it.
 - First week, adjusting to things. Good ideas. Moving forward. Make livestream even better for our people. Then this week blow after blow. Now if we have to go into lockdown, what does that mean? All this

work. Next week I very well may be do the live stream from my house, no PP, stressing about the money of the church. Then from upstairs we hear our son Josh laughing his head off. He has this really loud laugh. Tyler must have been tickling him or something. At first we just smiled. Then he kept going. Said, "Thanks Josh." Children are the best. Stop stressing about tomorrow Barton. This little moment is precious.

- Put all of this together now. You see this passage, the book of Ecc, and Bible has prepared you for this moment. We are prepared for anxiety, prepared for suffering, and prepared even for death itself. We need to remind ourselves of what we already know. We have something to share with our culture.
 - Culture is not prepared for suffering. Remind you of how you deal with it and share for those who need help to deal with it.
- Richard Schweter, cultural anthropologist, written says modern secular culture is the worst culture in history of the world at equipping its people with suffering. He says it has no strategy for dealing with it. That is why we have the most trouble.
 - Dr. Paul Brand, well known pioneering orthopedic surgeon who worked with treatment of leprosy, but spend his medical career in India and last half in US. ***"In the United States I encountered a society that seeks to avoid pain at all costs. Patients lived at a greater comfort level than any I had previously treated but they seem far less equipped to handle suffering and far more traumatized by it."***
- Why is that? Because modern secular people no longer believe in Bible and God. This universe is all there is. On the one hand this seems very freeing because you can choose to find meaning in whatever you want. You can define right and wrong however you want. But on the other hand, this is the worst of all worldviews for suffering. Why?
 - Because your meaning must be something in this world but everything in this world can be taken from you. Meaning is family, romance, career, political cause. It will all be taken. Not secure. Hebel.
 - How have we been equipped today and throughout this series?
- Ecc equips us to face the present situation because it gives us meaning from outside this world, which enable us to live in this world.
 - This whole book has been about how to live life on this earth, under the sun. But everywhere it is God's sun that shine, it is God's earth, and it is God who gives life and breath and everything else. Your hope is not in anything in this world. It is in God who is above and beyond, in God who is a rock, who cannot be shaken. Do you have this hope to turn to?
 - He is in control. He rules the times. He is weaving all of history into a great tapestry. We cannot understand his ways but what a joy to know we can rest in him.
 - Through Jesus we are loved by God. Relationship is secure.
- Ecc equips us to face the present situation because it tells us what's wrong with the world.
 - Human sin ruined everything. God bent his world so that it would not work the way it is supposed to. Shows us we are not gods. This should not surprise us. We should say hebel all the time. Meaning of hebel as cannot control.
 - But if God bent the world, then could he not bend it back again?
- Ecc equips us because it points to an afterlife.

- Solomon, the son of king David, only had a very dim view of what that was. But Jesus, the true and better Solomon, the true son of King David has brought absolute clarity.
 - Jesus came to make all things new. Restore us to God. Secure in God. Came to recreate the world.
 - Isn't this just pie in the sky? Need help now. Ah but that is the point. The great hope of a resurrection equips you now.
- Rom 8 One of our best Christian friends died a few weeks ago. She had a terrible childhood and struggled deeply with depression. She attempted suicide more times than I can count and was often committed to the psych ward at the hospital. And then she got cancer and passed away from all the complications around it.
 - She would often call me at her lowest points: "why has God allowed so much suffering in my life? How do I keep holding on to him? I just want to end it all." I well remember driving to the psych ward about 10 years ago to see her and praying that God would give me some verse to encourage her. And flashing through my mind was Romans 8.
 - Sat in this room and started reading it together. Paul says that in this fallen world even the children of God groan in our bodies. Normal to groan. Hebel. And oh how she groaned in her body. But Paul's purpose in writing is to fill us with hope. And what is this hope that awaits us? An inheritance that is so great that Paul says the sufferings of this present time are not even worth comparing to it. An inheritance, Paul says, that includes a resurrection body that is immortal. We talked about that and then went on to read about how hope is something that is still in the future. Hope is something we wait for. And then Paul wraps it all up and says we ***"wait for [this hope] with patience."***
- So you see, you are well equipped. God exists – find ultimate meaning in him, expect the world to be hebel, and look to Jesus who will bring you into a new world.
 - This enables you to face anything for it is an indestructible hope.