

I find it really fascinating that God would inspire Ecclesiastes and put it in the Bible.

We need to be reminded that when it comes down to it,
we need to hear what God says.
We walk by *faith* – not by sight.

Last time, at the end of chapter 7, we heard the *one thing* that the Preacher found
in all his observation of life under the sun.

“God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.”

If you walk by sight – if you order your life according to what you can observe –
then all you will find is that God made man upright,
but man has sought out many schemes.

The Preacher could find Dame Folly by sight –
but he could not find Lady Wisdom.

The autonomous quest – the self-governed quest for wisdom
winds up in the house of Folly.

So what next?

Chapter 7 brought us to the climax of the Preacher’s investigation,
so what more is there?
If the autonomous quest for wisdom cannot *find* Wisdom,
then what?

Well, you’re not dead yet, are you?
You still have to continue living.
You have to keep on going.
But at least you know one thing!

You know that you will never find wisdom under the sun.

But you still have to *live* under the sun.

God made man upright, but they have sought after many schemes.
That may be the *one thing* that is proven by all history and experience –
but that is not a satisfying conclusion.
No one can *live* as a perpetual cynic.

I know.

Some people try.
Indeed, cynicism is the modern temper –
especially in academic circles!

It's easy to be cynical –
about the use of power and language –
about the manipulation that exists in all human relationships –

God made man upright – but they have sought out many schemes...

So, if we live in a fallen world – a world that abides under the shadow of death –
how then shall we live?

1. The Way of Wisdom (8:1-17)

Who is like the wise?

And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

*A man's wisdom makes his face shine,
and the hardness of his face is changed.*

I once knew a man with a hard face.
You could see the cynical look in his eyes.
He was playing a game – and he knew it!

He started coming to church –
but he was wary – always on guard –
always looking out for the “catch” –
there's always a catch, right?
The church is just looking for ways to get more money, right?

But as the preaching the gospel took root –
and as the love of Christ grew in him –
his face changed.

“A man's wisdom makes his face shine.”

Think of the great Aaronic blessing in Numbers 6 –
which I use most Sunday evenings –

“the LORD bless you and keep you, the LORD make his face to shine upon you”

When the LORD's face shines on his people, that usually signifies his blessing.
Even so, man was created in the image of God,
and so when man's face shines, that usually signifies wisdom and blessing.

The rest of chapter 8 applies this to various situations:
First, in verses 2-9, “Obey the King.”

a. Obey the King (v2-9)

² I say:^[a] *Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him.*^[b]

Verse 2 could be translated two different ways:

“because of the oath *of* God”
or “because of the oath *to* God”

Either one would be a perfectly good translation –
but the meaning would be very different!

Why should you keep the king’s command?
Is it because of God’s oath to him?
Or is it because of your oath to God?

Is this emphasizing the divine right of kings –
that God has put him in this position? (or perhaps the specific promises to David)
Or is it focusing on the “social contract” –
that you are bound to the king by oath?

Both are true, so in one sense it doesn’t matter.

But even more, either way you take it,
we are reminded that while the king is absolute *under the sun* –
there is one who will call even the king to account.

But the Preacher focuses primarily on life under the sun:

³ *Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases.* ⁴ *For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, “What are you doing?”*

The question, “What are you doing?” suggests a stance of judgment.

If I ask my child, “what are you doing?”

I am asserting a right to overrule whatever it is that they are doing.

Even when you ask your friend, “Hey, what are you doing right now?”

you are implying that they should stop what they are doing
in order to come do something with you!

Only a very special and trusted counselor may ask a king, “What are you doing?”

The king does what he pleases – and no one may call him to account.

The only way to be safe before the king is if you never oppose him.

⁵ *Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way.* ⁶ *For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble^[c] lies heavy on him.*

The word translated “trouble” is the same word translated “evil” in verse 5.

There is an allusion here to Genesis 6:5,

that the “wickedness of man was great in the earth” –

if you wanted to make the allusion clear, you could translate v6 as
“although the wickedness of man is great on him”

Sin has corrupted and contaminated the whole earth.
The evil of man lies heavy on him.

It's important to allow that word “evil” to work in every way:
there are the bad things that happen *to* man (“natural evils”),
and there are the bad things that are done *by* man (“moral evils”) –
and among moral evils,
there are the bad things that are done *by* others *to* us,
and there are the bad things that are done *by* us *to* others!

We do things that hurt others.
And they do things that hurt us.

Truly, the “evil of man lies heavy on him.”

⁷ For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? ⁸ No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. ⁹ All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt.

The key to understanding verses 8-9 is the word “power.”
No man has power to retain the spirit – or power over the day of death...
you cannot escape war – evil cannot save.

And the problem is that man has power over man *to his hurt* – to evil.

As long as man has power over man – power to do evil –
then we cannot control our future.

This is at the heart of modern cynicism –
it was at the heart of ancient cynicism as well!

I understand the temptation to cynicism.

My parents had the perfect marriage.
When people had marriage problems, the pastor sent them to my folks for counseling.
Then, when I was 13, my folks suddenly divorced – for no apparent reason.
And then, a few months later, my pastor was caught in adultery –
and I never saw him again.

So the three most powerful people in my world collapsed in a six-month period.

Ever since then I have understood very well that the people who are closest to you have immense power to hurt you.

And that sets up the Preacher's point in verses 10-13:

b. Fear God (v10-13)

¹⁰ *Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised^[d] in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity.^[e]* ¹¹ *Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.*

The wicked used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised.

The reference to the "holy place" (the temple) reminds us that the Preacher is speaking of the holy people of God.

If there are no immediate consequences for sin,
then the heart of the children of man becomes fully set to do evil.

As Genesis 6 said,
"every thought of his heart is only evil all the time."

Children – you know how this works!

If you know that your parents won't actually discipline you –
but they will just get a little upset and then walk away –
what does that tell you?

It tells you that they don't really mind.
If there are no immediate consequences, then who cares?
I'll do whatever I want!

But the Preacher realizes that this is not the end of the story:

¹² *Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him.* ¹³ *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.*

Notice that here in verses 12-13, the Preacher is *not* relying on his own observations.
He does not say "I have seen" that it will be well with those who fear God.

After all, his own observation is that it doesn't really matter whether you fear God or not!
Everyone dies.

But as he observes the wicked being buried,
he reflects on something else that he *knows*.

"I know it will be well with those who fear God..."

I know this not because of observation, but because this is what God has said.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

But that doesn't mean that life "under the sun" is going to be easy.

He reminds us of this in verses 14-15

c. Eat, Drink, and Be Joyful (v14-15)

¹⁴ There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. 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.

When you are just living life 'under the sun' it is important to remember what God made us for!

"I commend joy."

"Eat drink and be joyful."

This is what God made us for.

"Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."

When we enjoy the things that God gave us to enjoy,
then we are enjoying *him* properly.

Obviously, if we are enjoying these things for our own selfish benefit,
then we are *not* enjoying them properly!

But the Preacher does not want to encourage a "health and wealth gospel" mentality.

I commend joy – by all means!

But fearing God, doing what is right, and enjoying life
will not guarantee you anything *under the sun!*

And so in verses 16-17, the Preacher encourages us towards humility:

d. Recognize That You Cannot Figure Out Everything (v16-17)

¹⁶ When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, 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.

No one can figure out everything.

However much you search and seek,
you will never find out all the work of God under the sun.

Now this might seem to encourage the attitude of cynicism!

So in chapter 9, the Preacher summarizes what he has learned:

2. Life and Death Under the Sun (9:1-12)

a. The Living Have Hope (v1-6)

But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him. ² It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, ³ to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. ³ This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead. ⁴ But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. ⁵ For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. ⁶ Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.

Again, remember that the Preacher is talking about “life under the sun.”

He resolutely avoids speculation about what comes next.

He remembers that “the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God” –
but in terms of what happens in this life,
the same event happens to all.

Everyone dies.

What comes next?

Will it be love or hate?

Man does not know.

It’s all the same – whether you are good or evil – clean or unclean –
whether you offer sacrifices at the temple – or not;
whether you make vows – or not.

And how can you know what will happen to you next?

Only the living have hope.

(Perhaps you’ve heard the saying, ‘where there’s life, there’s hope’?)

I mean, sure, the living all know that they are going to die –
but there is something in humanity that is resilient –
even the certainty of death does not stop us from looking forward with hope.

Think about this.

The Preacher has already said that the *one thing* that he knows
is that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes (7:29).

But while the image of God has been marred –
while man is no longer upright –
there is still a certain nobility –
there is something about humanity that still longs and yearns for God.

While there is life there is hope.

The word translated “hope” here carries with it the idea of *trust*.
When the Assyrians besieged Jerusalem,
Sennacherib sent his Rabshakeh to mock Israel.
And the Rabshakeh scorned Jerusalem for trusting in the LORD.
That is the only other use of this word in the Hebrew Bible.

The idea of hope is a *future confidence*.
What is your hope?
What is your future confidence?

As you look forward in life – what keeps you going?

In the face of the coming onslaught of death – what is your hope?
Verse 5 gives the Preacher’s answer:
“The living know that they will die” –
whereas the dead know nothing – because they are dead.

So the benefit of being alive – what keeps you going –
is that you not dead yet –
but that you know that you are going to die!

Why is this worthy of being called “hope”?!

In the past, the Preacher would give us advice –
“here’s what I have seen.”

But now the Preacher steps up his rhetoric and moves to the imperative:

b. Enjoy Your Food, Drink, and Clothing – In Defense of Joy (v7-10)

⁷ *Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.*

He’s not saying that God will approve of *whatever* you do.
Rather, he is speaking to those who fear God.
And he says “Yes, you know that you are going to die” –
but you also know that God has approved what you do –
he has approved of your works.
In other words,
don’t get stressed out about whether you are “good enough” for God.

John Calvin pointed out that if God has accepted you in Jesus,
he not only justifies your person,
but he also justifies your works.
God is never going to be more pleased with you than he already is!
No matter how hard you work –
no matter how hard you try –

if God has set his love on you in Christ,
then you will never be more pleasing to God than you already are!

And so the Preacher says:

⁸ *Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.*

Again, the Preacher is using imperatives.

These aren't just observations or suggestions –
these are commands.

White garments are what you would wear to a festival,
and certainly look forward to the Wedding Supper of the Lamb.
Olive oil was used in cleaning as well as anointing for feasts and parties.

Verse 9 is especially curious – in the way that he combines the strength of the imperative
with the cynical overtones of “hebel”:

⁹ *Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain^[g] life that he has given you
under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the
sun.*

This sounds familiar – but the Preacher is adding to his previous comments.

In the past, he had “observed” the importance of enjoying life with your wife.
Now he *commands* you to enjoy life with the wife whom you love.

It's not just a “good idea” to enjoy life with your wife.
It is commanded by God!

God created you for this!

And even though, yes, you're just going to die –
and go the same place as everyone else! –
you should enjoy life with the wife whom you love –
because that is your portion in life
and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.” (v9)

And so, as the Preacher says in verse 10:

¹⁰ *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might,^[h] for there is no work or thought or
knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.*

Are you feeling the tension between “enjoy life” and “everything is *hebel/vanity*”?

Work hard now, because when you die, there will be no work for you!

So whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might.
Because you're all going to die!

Notice that even though God has already approved your “doings” (v7),
the Preacher urges you to continue to “do” (v10).

We obey God – we do what he puts in front of us –
not in order to “win” God’s favor –
but because God has made us for this!
(and in Christ, we have been “created for good works” – Eph 2:10)

But even as verses 9-10 are a “defense of joy” –
so verses 11-12 are a “defense of mediocrity”:

c. “Man Does Not Know His Time” – In Defense of Mediocrity (v11-12)

¹¹ Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. ¹² For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

I call this “the defense of mediocrity” because while we are supposed to do with our might
whatever our hand finds to do,
the point is *not* to be the best!
The point is not to be swift, strong, wise, rich, or intelligent.
The point is not *to win*.
After all, the winner will die just like the loser!

Rather, the point is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever!

What is your hope?
Where is your confidence?
What gives you strength to go forward another day?

God made man upright,
but they have turned to many schemes.

And the wages of sin is death.
And so death puts an end to hope – as well as life.

For the dead –
“their love and their hate and their envy have already perished,
and forever they have no more share in all that is done under the sun.” (v6)

Ecclesiastes is a great book to wrestle with as we approach 1 Corinthians 15 next week!
Yes, we believe in the resurrection of the dead!

We believe.

It is a confession of faith!

But tell me,

have you ever seen a dead body raised from the dead?

In all your life under the sun –

have you seen anything that would lead you to believe that the dead will be raised?

Some scientific experiment?

A pattern in nature that because resurrection is common among grey squirrels –
therefore it should happen to us too?

No?

Then why do you believe in the resurrection of the dead?

Because God raised Jesus from the dead!

Ultimately, it comes down to faith.

Do you believe God?

Sing:

Augustine “How Great You Are, O Lord”