

“The Humility of Wisdom”

Ecclesiastes 8:16-9:10

The ‘Enlightenment’ or ‘Age of Reason’ was an important time in the history of the world that led to modern western societies. It occurred from the mid-17th to 18th centuries and is known as a time period of great change and new ideas.

The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement, in which famous thinkers and philosophers challenged some of the basic foundations of society, such as the role of government, basic human nature, sources of authority, and it championed ideas centered around liberty.

The Enlightenment followed on the heels of the Scientific Revolution which occurred two centuries before. It had launched a movement in society towards modern science based on using logic and reason to come to informed conclusions. Various philosophers who came along, such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Rousseau, and Voltaire, would then apply these same values to society and authority and begin to question all aspects of societal structure. It was all about knowledge based on reason.

One of the ironies of getting older is that you become more and more amazed by what you don't know. When you get older, you realize that you don't know as much as you once thought you did. Think about how this often plays itself out in the lives of our kids. When they are young, they idolize you as they think you know everything. Then, when they are teenagers, they demonize you because they don't think you know anything at all! But when they become adults, they immortalize you because they realize you really did know what you were talking about.

The person who has to know everything, or thinks he or she knows everything, is destined for disappointment in life. True wisdom is humble and teachable.

In the twilight of his life, King Solomon of Israel reflected on his own personal quest to know the mysteries of life and find satisfaction under the sun. And yet he says that trying to find the meaning of life was like chasing the wind. By the time we get to the end of chapter 8, we find him still struggling with many of the same questions. In the last couple of verses, he sounds like a frustrated philosopher.

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes has explained how wisdom is essential for navigating life's challenges. In order to live with understanding in God's world, you and I need God's wisdom. However, it also recognizes that there are some things that we will never know. Life is full of mystery. The wisdom that God supplies doesn't come in the form of an explanation. Rather, God's wisdom comes to us in the form of His promise that is based on His character.

In these verses that we're going to look at this morning, Solomon is going to tell us that wisdom recognizes what it can't understand, it realizes what it can't prevent, and it remembers what it can't keep. In that sense, he explains for us the humility of godly wisdom.

1. Wisdom recognizes the UNKNOWABLE (8:16-9:1)

"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, 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. 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."

All of Ecclesiastes represents Solomon's lifelong quest, one in which he tried his very best to discover meaning and the answers of life's mysteries under the sun. He honestly admits that the more he looked into things, the more he struggled to

make sense of life in the world. That's why he uses phrases such as under the sun, vanity of vanities, or chasing the wind. Even though these words were written by the wisest man who ever lived, a man who gained a reputation for his wisdom, he honestly admits that man cannot know all the answers. Reason gets you only so far.

Philip Ryken—*“Looking for the meaning of life was like chasing the sun. This helps us understand Ecclesiastes. It is not the kind of book that we keep reading until we reach the end and get the answer, like a mystery. Instead it is a book in which we keep struggling with the problems of life, and as we struggle, we learn to trust God with the questions even when we do not have all the answers.”*

If you are the type of person who has to have all of the answers to the problems you experience, then you will be miserable and frustrated in life. There are some things that you and I will never know, and true wisdom recognizes this.

His confession (v. 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, 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.”

Solomon confesses that even though he applied his heart to know wisdom, to see the business done on earth, there was much that he couldn't explain. It is a confession of how he came to know just how much he didn't know. No less than three times he says, “Man cannot find out!” The idea is that life is far too complicated and mysterious for anyone to figure out all of the answers. You can lose sleep trying to figure out why something happens, or why something is the way that it is, but it won't help one bit.

Try as hard as you may, yet you will never be able to unravel all of life's mysteries. Granted, we may be able to solve a puzzle or two along the way, but none of us are able to comprehend all the mysteries of life.

Deuteronomy 29:29—“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

God doesn't give us answers and explanations to all of our questions in life, but He does give us promises to live by. He doesn't expect us to know the unknowable, but He does expect us to trust and obey all that He has revealed. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, which means you must first confess your own limited understanding.

His conclusion (v. 1a)

“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.”

The Preacher says that life is full of mystery that is beyond our comprehension, and wisdom recognizes this, but those mysteries are not beyond God's hand. Wisdom means that we trust God with the things we can't explain. Many things in the divine government of the universe are simply beyond our capacity to know. How do we handle this?

Think about all that has happened in your life, things that have been determined by events over which you had no control, but impacted you—some for good, some for bad.

Under the sun, it seems as if life were full of random events that have no purpose. Darwinian theory says that life is the result of random process. Taken to its logical conclusion, life has no ultimate meaning. Life is what you make of it.

The complexity of life in the universe is evidence that there is an all-wise God, One whose intelligence is far superior to our own. Our lives are in His hands! Wisdom isn't the same thing as having all the answers. True wisdom admits that we are finite creatures with fallen minds and therefore incapable of understanding everything. Mystery doesn't have to result in despair, but is an opportunity for doxology.

Romans 11:33—“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable are His ways!”

When faced with situations and circumstances that I don't understand, instead of worrying, wisdom worships. Why? Because God's people are in God's hands. As a believer in Christ, the hand of God ought to be something that is an image of comfort and assurance for you.

We know that He's got the whole world in His hands! We know that His hands were pierced for our sins. We know that we are engraved on the palms of His hands (Is. 49:16).

We know this and can be confident in this. However, the Preacher is somewhat perplexed. He realizes that every person is in the hand of God, but where does each person stand? Notice then:

His confusion (v. 1b)

“Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him.”

Solomon is dealing with a person's position before God, where you stand before Him. No one is outside of His sovereignty, and the fate of every man is in the hands of God. But is God's hand for us or against us?

As Solomon wrestles with this question—is God for me or against me?—he discovered that it was impossible to answer the question simply by looking at one’s outward circumstances. Our knowledge is insufficient.

In his book *Brain Rules*, John Medina tells the intriguing story of Dr. Oliver Sacks, a British neurologist, and one of his patients, a woman who “suffered a massive stroke in the back region of her brain that left her with a most unusual deficit. She lost her ability to pay attention to anything that was to her left.” Medina explains the effect this had on her perceptive abilities:

“She could put lipstick only on the right half of her face. She ate only from the right half of her plate. This caused her to complain to the hospital staff that her portions were too small! Only when the plate was turned and the food entered her right visual field could she pay any attention to it and have her fill.”

Sometimes, I think we’re like this in our spiritual perception. While it’s easy for us to recognize the hand of God on the right, we fail to see Him working on the left. We’re grateful for what we perceive as His blessing, but we find it hard to discern His hidden hand during times of discouragement, disappointment, and trial.

The Bible is full of examples of those who had the same problem. Think of Naomi, bereft of her sons and her husband, now back in Bethlehem after a decade in Moab during a time of famine. She is soon the talk of the town, and the women of Bethlehem ask, “Is this Naomi?” But Naomi, whose name meant “pleasant,” responds:

Ruth 1:20-21—“Don’t call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

God is against me! Her problem was that she couldn't see what God was up to, and she misinterpreted her circumstances. We often do the same thing. The great hymn writer, William Cowper, said that God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform. He said:

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.
His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.
Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.*

Wisdom recognizes what is unknowable and trusts in the providential hand of God. Notice second that:

2. Wisdom realizes the INEVITABLE (9:2-6)

"It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, 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. 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. But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. 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. 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.”

Earlier in chapter 8, Solomon had assured us that things would go well for the righteous but not for the wicked. We know that this is true as far as eternity is concerned. But in the meantime, he still struggled to understand why it seemed the righteous were not blessed and the wicked were not cursed. Why do things seem backwards?

Back up in 8:14, he mentioned a reversal of fortunes that didn't make sense, one which good people get what bad people deserve and bad people get what good people deserve. Here, he makes a different point—no matter who a person is, we all suffer the same misfortune. He says that our circumstances are not an accurate gauge to tell whether God is for us or against us because the same misfortune happens to everyone. It is inevitable. Well, what is this inevitable misfortune to which Solomon refers? He is referring to death.

The universal nature of death (v. 2-3a)

“It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, 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. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all.”

Notice that in verse 2 and in verse 3 this phrase ‘the same event happens.’ No matter who you are, or what you have.

The Preacher distinguishes between two different types of people. On one hand, there are those described as being righteous, good, clean, and who offer

sacrifice. On the other hand, there are those described as wicked, evil, unclean, and who don't offer sacrifice.

Yet strange as it may seem, both groups suffer the same fate. Whether a person is righteous or wicked, good or evil, saint or sinner, the same 'event' happens. All of us will eventually die. It is inevitable and inescapable.

You've heard the story of the Merchant of Baghdad who one day sent his servant to the market. When the servant returned, he was pale as a ghost and trembling with fear. He told his master, "When I was at the market, I was bumped by someone in the crowd. When I turned around, I saw that it was Death who bumped into me and had a threatening look! Please, lend me your horse so I may flee to Samaria and hide where Death cannot find me." So the merchant lent him his horse and the servant galloped off in haste. Later that day, the merchant himself was at the market and saw Death standing in the crowd. He approached him and said, "Why did you threaten my servant this morning?" Death replied, "I didn't threaten him. I was only surprised to see him in the market here in Baghdad, for I have an appointment to see him tonight in Samaria." None of us can outrun death!

The ugly reality of death (v. 3b-6)

"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. But he who is joined with all the living has hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. 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. 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."

One commentator has written of this passage that it is as frustrating as anything we read in the entire book. It seems so empty, so 'vain' to use Solomon's word.

Philip Ryken—*“[He] ended chapter 8 by denying that anyone can understand the work that God does in the world. For a moment he gave us some hope that our lives were in the hands of a sovereign God, but then he said that it was impossible for us to know other God is for us or against us—the same fate awaits us all. Here he tells us how desperately and discouragingly sinful we are.”*

He says that while we are alive, our hearts are full of evil, and madness is in our hearts while we live.

“Madness”—*refers to moral insanity; irrational character*

Doesn't that word accurately describe our world? It is Solomon's way of describing how all of our days are marked by our fallen condition. People commit acts of lawless, senseless violence. They pursue self-destructive behaviors. They hurt the ones they love and need the most. It is all because humanity's heart is in the iron grip of sin.

Solomon says that worst of all, we die in the end. Man's heart is wild and untamed while he lives, and then he dies. It is his fate, one that always looms just over the horizon.

J.C. Ryle—*“Death is the mighty leveler. He spares no one. He will not tarry until you are ready. He will not be kept out by moats, and doors, and bars, and bolts.”*

The Preacher reminds us here that death is inevitable. It is an unavoidable, inescapable appointment that you can't cancel, reschedule, or wiggle your way out of. Sooner or later, it will take us all. (Heb. 9:27)

Solomon is saying here that it is better to be alive than dead. He says in verse 4, “He who is joined with all the living has hope.” And then he uses a proverb to show how this is the case as he says, “for a living dog is better than a dead lion.” Now that doesn't have the same effect on the reader that it did in Solomon's day. Our pets today are pampered. We fluff them up and Instagram them. In the

world of the Bible, however, dogs were nasty scavengers. They were diseased little mutts that ran through the city streets. A lion, on the other hand, was a symbol of nobility.

When Solomon says a living dog is better than dead lion, its because death ends the hopes and dreams of this life.

Look at the next statement he makes there in verses 5-6:

“For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and that have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. 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.”

Of course, this does not mean that there is no life after death. Remember that Solomon is writing from an under the sun perspective. From strictly an earthbound view, when people die they cannot return. All that this life can afford is forever ended.

His point is this—living is better than dying. If we are going to get anything out of life, if our present existence is to have any meaning at all, it must be found now before we die. We must not waste it, but use it and fill it to the full.

3. Wisdom remembers the ENJOYABLE (9:7-10)

“Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that God has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.”

The wisdom from God at work in a person's life recognizes the unknowable, it realizes the inevitable, but notice it also remembers the enjoyable. It isn't proud and arrogant, it isn't shortsighted, and neither is it morose or ill-tempered. Godly wisdom knows how to have a good time.

Notice that Solomon mentions at least three joys in life, each of which come as a gift from the Lord:

Contentment (v. 7-8)

“Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.”

He describes the basic pleasures of eating and drinking, and the word ‘go’ conveys a sense of urgency. It is as if the Preacher is saying, “Go, make the most of your life while you have it to live! Don’t miss out on the simple joys of life that come as a gift from the hand of God.” He tells us to receive each pleasure with God-centered joy in the heart.

Listen to the language he uses—“...for God has already approved what you do.” The idea is that God has given His gift of approval.

I find here a faint echo of the New Covenant! In His grace, God has made me righteous through faith in Christ. I am freely accepted. And because I have this by faith, I am free to enjoy life. No longer do I have to struggle, not knowing whether or not my life is pleasing to God. No longer do I have to fear the coming onslaught of death because I know that death has been defeated by Jesus. I can now live in a way that pleases Him and bring glory to Him because I have been given His righteousness. On the basis of what I have been given in Christ, I can now live my life to the full.

Companionship (v. 9)

“Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that God has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.”

In view of everything that Solomon has said up until this point, it is only fitting that he tells us to enjoy the gift of companionship. Husbands and wives are to enjoy life together, for the time is coming when earthly companions are no more.

“Vain”—*not meaningless, but brief*

Wisdom remembers the people in our lives and enjoys their company. Life is far too brief to take your loved ones for granted.

Calling (v. 10)

“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.”

Our ‘toil’ under the sun refers to the calling that God has placed upon our lives. It is the task that God has given you to do. Do you view your vocation as a sense of calling? If you are a teacher or a mechanic, a doctor or a sales clerk, whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might! It is a gift from God that you should enjoy as long as you can.

When we obsess over the things that we don’t know or don’t have, the things that are beyond our reach, we miss out on the very things that Solomon says we should be enjoying. Do you enjoy these simple gifts?

Just this week I have tasted some of the little joys of life:

- yesterday morning’s sunshine as I worked out in my yard
- two bowls of Bluebell strawberry ice cream
- throwing a football with my kids and their cousins

- riding around downtown Jacksonville with my dad
- holding Anita's hand while we talked coming up the road

The very best things in life are free, and they are the simple gifts from God that we often take for granted. To have these simple joys is to know His grace. We are always wanting something else, not content with what we have, not realizing what we have until it is gone. Wisdom from the Lord remembers what is truly enjoyable.

Wisdom doesn't have to have an explanation for everything in order to be content. It leaves the mysteries of life in the hands of God. Wisdom realizes that death looms on the horizon for every person. It makes the most of every day and every opportunity that life affords. Wisdom enjoys the simple things in life. It is not always scanning the horizon for something to satisfy the heart, but is able to enjoy God's gifts because the heart has already been satisfied in Christ.

Does this describe the way you're living your life right now? It should, especially if you know God through faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ—His death on the cross for our sins and His resurrection from the grave. As those who are able to look back to the cross, we have even more reason to be joyful than Solomon. That's why we can enjoy the simple joys of life, even when we don't fully understand the mysteries of life, even when we're faced with the brevity of life and the certainty of death—all because we know the Savior. Do you know Him?

"Father, we praise You for being the all-wise, all-knowing God. When we can't understand our circumstances or discern what You are doing in our lives, help us to trust You. Make us truly wise! Thank You for rescuing us from the clutches of sin and death through the sacrifice of Jesus. May the simple gifts You have given be cause for worship and gratitude in our hearts. In Jesus' name, Amen."