



Ecclesiastes

(17) Faith Amid the Enigmas of Life

Ecclesiastes 8:10-17

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We had a number of interesting conversations travelling to and from Synod and at Synod itself. One of them was at lunch and we were talking about education in our culture. Brian Murray was part of that discussion and, of course, he has done a lot of thinking about education seeing that he is an educator. The gist of the discussion was the fact that in our society today there is a declining interest in studying the humanities – that is subjects like history and philosophy and literature. Mostly people take courses of study that will equip them for a specific job, but there is much less interest than there used to be on learning to think deeply about the great questions of life – that is what the humanities do. That is not universally true, but it is a trend and I have read of some universities that are having trouble attracting students to their humanities programs.

Now on one hand this is understandable. Higher education is expensive, and few people have the resources to spend a couple hundred thousand dollars learning to think deeply about the fundamental questions of life. Education has to be an investment and you need to be able to get a job at the end of it. But on the other hand, this is troubling because fewer and fewer people are graduating with much knowledge of the past and the history of thought that has got us to where we are today. And that does not bode well for our society.

Now my point is not that all our young people need to go to university and if they do go to university that they need to study the humanities. My point is that we must all have some interest in the great questions

and problems of life because as Jesus says, life consists of more than eating and drinking and clothing – in other words the everyday stuff of life.

The Bible deals with the great themes of existence: The existence of God and what he is like. What is the meaning of life? Questions of right and wrong. Why is the world the way that it is? Why is there suffering and what does it mean? And most importantly how can we be right with God and live in a way that is pleasing to him. The Bible requires that we think about more than issues of work and money and getting ahead and living a comfortable life. It requires that we think deeper than that. It requires that we think about what life is for and why the world is as it is. It requires that we are concerned with more than our own little lives to think about the big picture of what is going on in the world and how that relates to the glory of God and the kingdom of God.

The subject that these verses deal with is the apparent lack of justice in the world. By dealing with this subject the Bible is saying that justice is something that we should be concerned about. We should care that the justice system is working the way that it should. We should be troubled when it does not. We all have our own interests and preoccupations and that is normal and necessary. But what this text and many others are showing us is that we could be interested in and concerned about bigger issues and problems than our own private affairs and activities. God is a God of justice and we are being transformed to be more and more like him. That means that we should care about the great injustices that we see around us in the world. One of the results of salvation is that we increasingly are concerned with the glory of God. God is not glorified when injustice prevails in society. Another of the results of salvation is that we are being transformed into people who love others. Love cares about the suffering of others and whenever there is injustice, people are suffering. In general, we can say that one of the results of salvation is that we become interested in and concerned about many things that do not affect us directly but do affect the glory of God and the wellbeing of others - in other words the big questions of life and existence.

So, we should care about this subject that Ecclesiastes brings before us today. It belongs to being a Christian that we care about the things that God cares about. It belongs to being a Christian that we care about things that are beyond our own immediate concerns. The author of Ecclesiastes reflects this because he is troubled about the injustice that he sees around him.

Now what is particularly interesting about this passage is that it speaks about the issue of injustice in two distinctly different ways. There are some verses that say that often justice is not being done and there are some verses that say that justice will be done. There is a tension between the two ways that justice is discussed in these verses, and that tension is not solved in the text. And that is very interesting and actually quite instructive. That, I think is the point of this text.

So, we have verse 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 vanity." There is something wrong here. The author is describing hypocrites. They were wicked. They were outwardly religious, but they lived wicked lives. And when they died, the major gave a speech about what fine people they were. This type of thing happened often enough that the author of Ecclesiastes mentions it as one of the things that is vanity in life under the sun. If we haven't seen this in real life, we have probably seen something like it in a movie or read about it in a novel. This is a thing and it bugged the author of Ecclesiastes. Hypocrites. Outwardly religious. Wicked in the rest of their lives. And they get a fine speech at their funeral about what wonderful people they were. This for the author of Ecclesiastes is vanity. It is one of the things about the life in this world that troubled him.

Next, he mentions the problem of the delay of consequences for evil. Verse 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." Here the Bible is affirming the importance of penalties as a deterrence. The idea of punishment as a deterrent is not popular today. But that is because the Bible is no longer popular. This verse is making the point that the result of delaying punishment is that people are encouraged to continue to do evil. According to the Bible painful consequences for evil

deeds are a deterrent and that deterrent is lost if the sentence “is not executed speedily.

Parents! Take note! If you do not discipline your children speedily, the hearts of your children will be fully set to do evil. God is a big believer in discipline as a deterrent for evil behaviour. And since he created us, his thinking must shape our thinking and our actions in this area and not the humanistic drivel that presents itself as wisdom for parenting in our day. In the language of the book of Proverbs, “Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him” (Proverbs 13:24). Don’t hate your kids by being lax in disciplining them. And that includes delaying “the sentence against an evil deed.”

Anyway, the author of Ecclesiastes noticed that the authorities in his world were lax about handing down their sentences and he saw the consequences of that. And that was disturbing to him.

Then we have verse 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.” So bad things happening to good people and good things happening to bad people. That is not the way things are supposed to work. Bad things should happen to bad people and good things should happen to good people. But often things do not work out as they should and that according to Ecclesiastes is vanity.

Then we have the other side of the story. Here the author of Ecclesiastes is giving a different perspective on the same question. Verses 12-13, “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. 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.” Here the author of Ecclesiastes is expressing his faith in the justice of God and in the word of God that those who fear the Lord will be blessed and that “it will not be well with the wicked.”

So, we have these two statements side by side. On the one hand, there is this great biblical principle that it will go well with the righteous and it

will not go well with the wicked. This is rooted in the justice of God. People get what they deserve. On the other hand, it does not always work out that way. Sometimes wicked hypocrites are praised at their funerals. Sometimes justice does not come swiftly enough so that wicked people are confirmed in their evil ways. Sometimes the righteous get what the wicked deserve and the wicked get what the righteous deserve. There is a tension between these two statements. On the one hand the author affirms his faith that God is just, and people will get what they deserve. On the other hand, he is troubled by the fact that it does not always work out that way in this life under the sun.

It is important to remember that the author of Ecclesiastes did not have a very clear understanding of the final judgment after this life and the afterlife in general. There are a few verses in the Old Testament which speak of justice beyond the grave, but they are not many. Mostly Old Testament saints had only a vague inkling that there was anything beyond this life. Most of the time when they thought of death they thought of it as the end. We see this in the next chapter in Ecclesiastes, 9:5-6, "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." The Old Testament saints did not have the same hope and confidence concerning the afterlife that we see in the New Testament.

That means that it really looked like the wicked often got away with their wickedness. The author of Ecclesiastes has commented a number of times on the fact that righteousness or wickedness seems to make no difference because the righteous often suffer terribly and the wicked often sail through life without a care and then they both die. If a wicked person dies without experiencing justice in this life, it seems like he has gotten away with his wickedness. And if a righteous person has a lot of suffering in this life and then dies it seems that he has not been rewarded for his righteousness.

That heightens the contrast in our text. The author expresses faith that it will go well for the righteous and it will not go well with the wicked. But right alongside of that he expresses his distress at the fact that often the very opposite happens in real life. Often it does not go well for the righteous and it does go well for the wicked.

The point that is so important here is that these two statements are set alongside each other without the problem that they express being solved. There is a tension that is not resolved. There is a tension between what the author of this book knows to be true about God and his ways and what is actually happening on the ground. And what is so important here is that the tension is not resolved, and the author continues to maintain what he knows to be true about God in spite of the fact that the evidence that he sees around him does not seem to fit well with what he knows to be true about God.

Verses 16-17 gives his conclusion about this whole matter of this tension between God's character and his promises, and situations in life that seem to contradict God's character and his promises. "When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on the earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes 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." He is talking about seeking wisdom. He wants to understand what is going on in the world and why things are the way that they are. He wants this badly enough that he loses sleep because of the enigmas that he sees in life on this earth. But he comes to see that there are things about God's way with the world that he will never understand. That is the gist of these last two verses of the chapter. "Man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun." His confession is that it is all ultimately the work of God. He believes in the sovereignty of God. He believes that nothing happens that is not somehow part of God's plan. And he has to conclude that there are certain things that are beyond us as human beings. There are certain things that we will never be able to understand.

But he does not give up his confession of what he knows to be true about God. We have seen how the confession of God's justice is held side by side with his observations concerning things in this life that do not seem to fit well with what God has said concerning the consequences of righteousness and the consequences of wickedness. He does not give up on his trust that somehow in some way the truth of

God's word will be vindicated even if he does not see that happening at the present time.

And that is why he can commend joy for the people of God even when they are troubled by the vanity and the enigmas of this life. Verse 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 this life that God has given him under the sun." Trust in God and in his good plan for the world makes it possible to have joy in the regular activities of life even through there is so much that is wrong and disturbing about life under the sun. The author of Ecclesiastes assumes that there will be many things about what goes on in the world that will be troubling, but he is saying that we can trust that God knows what he is doing and that he is working everything out for his good purposes. And if we do that we can rejoice in life even there are many things beyond our understanding and many of those things are profoundly troubling.

Now the key to this is the knowledge of God. The key to this is using what we know about God to enable us to trust him when we are faced with things that are troubling about his way with the world. Clearly there are many things that we cannot understand. Why did God allow the Rwandan Genocide? Why did God allow the Hutus to kill 800,000 Tutsis in 100 days back in 1994? Why does God allow little girls and boys to be kidnapped and used as sex slaves? How is it possible that the vast amount of excruciating suffering in the world somehow contributes to the glory of God and the good of his people? Why does God allow history to go on for such a long time in such a messy way before bringing the whole business to a conclusion and the renewal of all things? There are lots of questions. And these questions are very real and very troubling. We can understand where the author of Ecclesiastes is coming from when he says that this or that thing is vanity and a chasing after the wind. There are many, many things that go on in the world that are tough to accept and tough to square with the sovereignty and the goodness of God.

This problem has sometimes caused people to lose their faith in God and to turn away from God. C.S. Lewis did not lose his faith in his

suffering because of the death of his wife, but he insightfully expressed the temptation that suffering brings to make us question the goodness of God. This is what he wrote in his reflection on his suffering called, *A Grief Observed*. “Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is in coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not, ‘so there is no God after all’ but “so this is what God is really like. Deceive yourself no longer.”

This is the temptation that comes with the things about life in this world that do not seem to fit with a good God who is sovereign over everything that happens in the world. In our text passage, the author of Ecclesiastes is struggling with the fact that so often the wicked do not get what they deserve and the righteous often get what the wicked deserve. The question that raises is, “What kind of God allows that to happen?” and “How can I trust God if he says that those who serve him are blessed and those who defy him are cursed, when that does not seem to be the way it works out in real life?”

There are people who lose their faith because of such questions. They look at what goes on in the world and they conclude that they cannot believe in the existence of a good and just God in the light of all the injustice and suffering in the world. They reason from the bad things in the world to what God must be like to allow such things to happen and they want no part of that kind of God.

These verses in Ecclesiastes give us an example of someone who saw the problems but refused to draw the conclusion that God is not good and not just, because he allows the righteous to suffer and the wicked to get off scot-free. And what he is demonstrating to us is trusting what he knows to be true about God more than any conclusions he might be tempted to draw about God on the basis of his observations of troubling things in the world. This is really about whether we trust our own thinking or whether we trust what God has revealed of himself to us in his word.

It is tempting to trust our own thinking about such things. So, we read about some of the murderers of the Rwandan Genocide who got away with their terrible deeds and we reason that God must be some kind of sadist to allow such things to happen. We might reason that the fact

nothing happens apart from the will of God and that powerful people murder the weak and get away with it, means that God cannot be good and kind and just – that he is evil or at best indifferent to the suffering in this world. That is a conclusion about God based on human reasoning. And sometimes people turn away from God because of such reasoning.

But what does the author of Ecclesiastes show us in our text passage? On the one hand, he faces the troubling facts about life. But on the other hand, he continues to trust in God and to affirm what God has affirmed in his word – namely that “it will be well with those who fear God” and “it will not be well with the wicked.”

And he confesses the limitations of human reasoning. He tried to understand God’s way with the world. He applied his heart to know wisdom. But in the end, he came to conclusion that “man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun.” In other words, man cannot understand the ways of God with the world. God is sovereign. God is good. How that fits with the Rwandan Genocide we cannot understand. But we can trust that at the end of the day “it will be well with those who fear God” and it will not be well with the wicked.”

Now we have more insight into this question because we have much more revelation about the final judgment of God. We have the great comfort and hope that in the final judgment everyone will get what they deserve. The author of Ecclesiastes did not have the clarity on that that we have. But we still face agonizing questions. Even the final judgment does not make it easy to deal with the fact that God allowed six million Jews to be slaughtered or that he allows little children to be murdered by sexual predators. We still face agonizing questions about why God allows certain things to happen.

This passage shows us that we must trust what we know to be true about God even when we cannot understand the way that he governs the world. For God has told us a lot about himself in his word. He tells us of many instances of incredible love for his sinful people. He shows us how he is faithful to promises that he made centuries before. He shows us how he directs history in mysterious ways to bring about his purposes. Think of how long it took before the Old Testament promises concerning Jesus were fulfilled. Think of how unexpected the fulfillment

was compared to the expectation and yet how much more glorious it was than the expectation.

And think especially about God's own sacrifice of his Son. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...." God loves the world and he proved it by sending his Son to die for the sins of the world. And God reminds us that his ways are higher than our ways. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." The story told in the Bible tells us a lot about the goodness of God and the compassion of God and the mercy of God and the trustworthiness of God and of his faithfulness to his word. The story of Jesus tells us a lot about the love of God for a sinful world. Jesus is the greatest revelation of God.

And so, the author of Ecclesiastes calls us to take what we know about God and to lay it alongside all the troubling things that we see in the world around us and to trust what we know about God without having to understand everything about God's mysterious way with the world. He is calling us to trust the word of God more than our own reasoning on the basis of our experience in the world. And he is telling us that if we do that we can have joy even when there is so much that we cannot understand. Joy does not mean that we are no longer disturbed by all the suffering and other horrible things in this world. But it does mean that we can trust that the God who brings salvation out of the death of Christ will also work everything else together for his glory and for the true and eternal wellbeing of his people and he will do that in such a way that we will one day see his goodness in all that has happened in the history of this world.