

Limited Wisdom

Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

Pastor Dale Evans, March 17, 2019 AM

Introduction

As we continue this morning, marching through the book of Ecclesiastes, I want to begin with a confession. When preaching this book, it is incredibly difficult to do it justice. There are a number of reasons that make this so. One is that Ecclesiastes is a literary unit and yet is a mix of prose, poetry and proverb.

Each of these types of literature should be read with care because each has their own, shall we say, “rules” for interpretation. Remember the book has a third person, narrative, prose frame of chapter 1:1-11 and then 12: 9-14. And then in the middle is composed of elements of first person, autobiographical prose but is primarily a mixture of proverbial statements and poetry. You cannot and should not read and interpret this book like say the apostle Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi. But we are so conditioned to read our Bibles through the lens of the familiar Pauline epistles that our natural leaning is to try to read Ecclesiastes the same way. What we need to do is let the poetry and proverb provide the general sense and then think about the implications to which they lead. That does not mean we do not take time to understand what is actually being said, it is just that sometimes the imagery or the metaphor doesn’t seem to be very clear. That is OK. I am sure over the past several weeks you have thought “I wonder how Pastor Russ got that from that verse?”

And, we should read and interpret this book as a singular text. We should approach a book like Ecclesiastes recognizing that it has an intention and meaning that you can only completely and accurately understand when you have read through the entire document (and I would suggest more than once). Pastor Russ has set us on this trajectory, providing some foreshadowing and expectations for the meaning of the book as a whole as we are trying to come to grips with each individual section. Some sections are more understandable than others; some need to be read with the larger context in view. That is why some of Russ’s sermons have been more general with respect to the text of the morning, because you have to suspend your judgment until later or bring some baggage with you from the week or two before.

This approach to Scripture should not surprise us, in fact it reinforces how we have stressed we should read our Bibles in general. Even though individual passages, verses and phrases are held in high regard, frequently referenced and memorized or even claim to be “life verses”, we need to be people of the “whole book.” We are adding an understanding of Ecclesiastes to our overall understanding of the Bible’s storyline and message. This will impact our application of both Old Testament passages as well as NT texts.

Exposition

So we come this morning to chapter eight of the Book of Ecclesiastes and are faced with this kind of situation. We are in the middle of a section that deals with the vanity or enigma of the assumption that wisdom alone can answer all of life's problems and predicaments. Things don't always work out like Proverbs seems to promise. We should not read Ecclesiastes as "against" Proverbs, but as a complement to the wisdom that the book of Proverbs encourages.

Verses 1-9

Let us examine the first nine verses of chapter eight.

*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.*

In verse one, we have a double rhetorical question and a proverb. A rhetorical question is one whose answer is obvious and is used as a transition or an attention marker. There are some that see this verse more as the conclusion to what came before in chapter seven but likely serves as a hinge, connecting the two sections together, marking the new section as extending the previous. It is asking, who can better figure out problems, "interpret things" or "understand matters" than someone who is wise. That is what wisdom is all about is it not? Wisdom is the skillful application of knowledge in a particular situation. We all know people who seem to know a lot, perhaps at work, but don't seem to be able to figure out problems. And then on the flip side, we know people who may not be the smartest one in the room, but they seem to be able to apply what they know to troubleshoot and solve almost any problem. That is what wisdom is all about. In fact the one who seems to know but can't work out the problem is often grumpy, difficult and demeaning. The truly wise individual is understanding, kind and helpful. That is the meaning of the proverb that follows. When one's face shines they are gracious and caring. That is what it means when the blessing asks that: "God's face shine upon you and give you peace." So verse one asserts that the wise one is that person with grace and help.

But as we have said, Ecclesiastes is not about merely what ought to be the case but puts what actually is to the forefront to challenge us to put things into the right perspective when life doesn't seem right or fair. So we move to verses two through four.

I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him.

*Be not hasty to go from his presence.
Do not take your stand in an evil cause,
for he does whatever he pleases.*

*For the word of the king is supreme,
and who may say to him, "What are you doing?"*

This situation portrayed is intended to be seen as a complication of the previous proverb. When you would expect that a wise person would be seen as the epitome of helpfulness and assistance, there are times when it just doesn't work. Especially when you are dealing with "the king". This section challenges us to, for the most part, do what the king says. Notice the insertion of the autobiographical "I" in this and the next paragraph. This is the suggestion of the Preacher. Why should this be? Depending on how you render the next phrase in English, either because of his position under God (God's oath to him) as the ESV suggests, or because of our oaths to God to honor the king (as the NIV or the NLT) or in the same manner we give allegiance to God we should obey the king. In any way we are to follow and obey the king. But what if he is wrong, silly, bullheaded, misinformed, self-centered? The Preacher suggests sometimes you should just back away and leave it alone. Why? Because the word of the king is supreme, even a wise person can't change it regardless of how much grace and "shining face" they bring.

This concern continues into verses five through eight.

*Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing,
and
the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way.*

For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him.

For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?

*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.*

Two proverbs begin this section. Both seem to suggest that wisdom should give one the right approach to keep out of trouble. And then in an echo of chapter three we are reminded that even though we can be confident of the timing, flow and cadence of life, "man's trouble", the evil of humanity, seems to lie heavy on everything. The Preacher goes on to suggest that even the wise cannot know exactly what will be the outcome of any circumstance, "he does not know what is to be." And then this thought is reinforced by a poetic sequence of things we can't control or know ahead. Can anyone control either the wind (or perhaps the human spirit from leaving the body which connects it to the next idea) or prevent death? Once you are on the frontlines, you can't just call a timeout and leave the battle and wickedness will never be someone's deliverer even though it tempts us to believe it is so.

So in verse nine we have another autobiographical insert.

*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 summary is that, when someone has authority and superiority, absolute power often corrupts absolutely. Even though wisdom would suggest the best answer, the appropriate time and place; in the face of power that especially is driven by “man’s trouble”, wisdom still seems to fail.

Verses 10-14

Which brings us to the next section, verses ten to fourteen. Here again, some read verse ten with verse nine and start the new section at eleven. The transition is not meant to be absolute, but the “then” brings us to a newer idea in verse ten.

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.

Many scholars think this is the most difficult verse in the entire book to understand. Some of this is because of a textual issue in the Hebrew. The main idea is easy. When the wicked die we then remember how they were perceived in life. Even the wicked often put on an appearance of piety, especially if the culture views such activity highly. I have friends who moved to the Texas Bible-belt and remarked that when you went out for Sunday lunch you dressed in your “Sunday best” even if you didn’t go to church so everyone at least thought you did. And we are now attuned to see presidential candidates promote their “spiritual side” as primaries and elections grow closer. But the concern is whether the wicked dead are “praised” for this activity, which might be then read as ironic. This would fit with the general tone of the book. Or is it that they are “forgotten” which is actually the majority and more difficult reading. This then is actually to lead us to the next idea, implying that the deeds of the wicked soon fade with out any retribution soon after they are buried. Where is the justice?

So a new proverb opens the next idea that follows this statement in verses eleven and thirteen.

*Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily,
the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.*

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.

The proverb, a statement as to why evil flourishes, is followed by a statement of conventional wisdom that points to a future and absolute judgment. These statements pop up in the book providing us with indication that the Christian realism orientation of the book is not a pure pessimism. But you have to get to the end of the book to confirm this. We are still in chapter eight.

Then the mention of vanity introduces another concern that is expressed in verse fourteen.

*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.

The vanity, the enigma is that this life often seems unfair. So why try?

Verses 15-17

And that brings us to the conclusion of this larger section here in verses fifteen through seventeen.

*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.*

In verse fifteen we are again challenged as we have been several times in the book (2:24, 3:10, 3:16, 5:18, 8:15, 9:7, 11:7) to live with joy and satisfaction in and with the circumstances that God has given us for the time being, that is “under the sun.”

*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.*

The preacher, notice again the first person insertions here, says that trying to understand how all this works leads to sleepless nights and endless worry. We do not have the ability to understand God's plans in their entirety. His wisdom is beyond ours.

Reflection

This text reaffirms what we have been hearing from Ecclesiastes all along.

First, in a quote from Pastor Russ several weeks ago, “this present world, under the sun, was designed by God and is under His providential control.” We cannot understand God completely. Romans 11 concluded with this doxology from verses 33-36:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

*“For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?”*

“Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be glory forever. Amen.

I could spend a great deal of time discussing this theme and wandering through many passages that speak to this. We should be reassured that God is in control, that he is powerful, wise and good.

But also we should note, again from Pastor Russ that “This world is fallen and much in it is empty and meaningless if the End is not taken into consideration.” There are great contradictions apparent. Children and young people die early, spouses are abused, illness sneaks in with pain and distress, people are taken advantage of, greed leads some to riches, “nice guys finish last”; these are all realities in this world. They are counter to what “godly wisdom” would suggest is the better way. But this life is not all there is. Without thinking of the longer, end-game, we are indeed confused, miserable and lost.

That is why we are challenged to live in this manner, again from Pastor Russ, “many good and wonderful things have been given to us in this world to enjoy.” Do we trust God for what he is doing or do we doubt his ability, wisdom or goodness.

Russ has also said, “Nothing in this world can fully satisfy us and it will lead to futility and frustration to try.” Our satisfaction is to be found in God. We often only trust God because we believe that he will give us our “best life now.” But the reality shows this is not true, our best life is yet to come and we should trust him in the situations that he gives us here, rejoicing in both blessing and struggle, calm in both good times and suffering, hope that looks ahead and then sees the “now” with different eyes.

We still have four chapters to go, let us continue to learn and grow in what is truly the gospel according to Ecclesiastes, we have and bring nothing to God, trust him and the power of the cross, the ultimate in contradictions, for life and hope.

