

Living wisely in an unjust world

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[0 : 0 0] let's pray Father as always we need your help we need your wisdom to understand what you have to say to us we know that on our own even if we apply our own minds without the help of your spirit there is no way that we can understand what you have to say to us so Father please illumine our minds and help us to marvel again that to recognize that you are the king above all kings you are the one who is on the throne always and forever we pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ Amen last week we were introduced by the teacher to wisdom wisdom we discovered has its limitations it cannot make straight what God has made crooked our world is crooked our hearts are crooked and all our human schemes turn out to be the source not the solution to our crookedness so wisdom by itself is no quick fix but that doesn't mean we throw out wisdom last week we saw that wisdom is still valuable after all what is biblical wisdom it's about more than just simply knowing what is true or false what is right or wrong it is about discerning what is the most faithful and fitting thing we can do in a particular situation but how can we live wisely in a world filled with imperfect even unjust authorities now this is where the teacher now turns his attention to having given us a bit of a theoretical framework in chapter 7 he now seeks to apply his valuable if limited wisdom to a more concrete situation how do you live under imperfect authorities and unjust governments our teacher after all isn't naive about the kind of world we live in he knows very well the conundrum we face in fact in today's passage he faces the facts of life head on and he confronts this unsettling fact there's no justice there's no justice you see as Christians we subscribe to verses 12 and 13 although a wicked person who commits a hundred crimes may live a long time

I know that it will go better with those who fear God who are reverent before him yet because the wicked do not fear God it will not go well with them and their days will not lengthen like a shadow well that's what we believe right we believe that God will do what is right and just after all in Psalm 33 verse 5 we read that the Lord loves righteousness and justice the earth is full of his unfailing love and so we believe that the Lord will reward those who are good and punish those who are wicked we believe that he loves the widow the orphan the refugee the marginalized but the problem is although that's what we believe that's not what we see instead we see verse 14 the righteous who get what the wicked deserve and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve and that's especially true today where we are more globally aware than ever before thanks to the internet we watch in dismay as crimes go unpunished by both sides in the Ukraine-Russia war we throw our hands up in the air when hidden injustices are exposed and as they are uncovered but the perpetrators seem to get always got free just think of JOLO and WADMDB and so we wonder if the Lord really loves righteousness and justice I was reading a novel this week and one of the characters asked another character do you believe in God and the other character says no she can't because Christians might talk about how everything here is divine providence but all she sees is divine ignorance she cannot understand why all these unjust things are happening all over the world and God doesn't seem to be aware of any of it after all if he was wouldn't he step in and so the novel captures well the doubts that we have what we believe and what we see sometimes don't match up and sometimes that shakes us up but that isn't the only unsettling thing that we have to face what's perhaps worse is that we can feel that there's no control so often our world can feel like verse four where a king's word is supreme and no one can ever speak against him that's the conundrum have you ever felt that perhaps you've had a similar experience as I did during my school days one day a teacher suddenly decided that I was guilty of something wrong even though I was innocent I was scolded and punished for talking and playing in class although I was doing no such thing despite my protests the teacher would not listen injustice was being done but I was powerless and that's where we so often find ourselves under the control of imperfect or even unjust authorities whether that be an overzealous teacher an

unreasonable boss or corrupt government well that's how life often is isn't it the government could implement an unwise tax policy that could ruin your business the local council could give permission for a factory to be built in your neighbourhood even though it pollutes the environment a boss could place you in a completely unreasonable position and you have no say you can't do a thing about it you have no control that's the reality of our

Hebel world when the wrong people are in charge injustice so often results or in the words of verse 9 it comes about when someone somewhere lords it over others Jayakumar Christian is the director of World Vision India which is a Christian NGO that works in poverty alleviation and fights against child labour and one of his observations is quite profound the poor are poor he says because someone else is trying to play God in their lives someone is putting into action verse 9 this he says more than the mere lack of money more than the misallocation of resources is often the biggest issue so take the

[8 : 13] Along for example he placed God in the lives of families too poor to repay their debts like a God he promises benefits while providing vast resources but soon the benefits disappear while the demands increase before long the family cannot pay what they owe to the Lord and so like a God he demands a sacrifice and often it is the child who is requested and that's why we have the global child slavery trait the teacher sees all this clearly in verse 9 he says whenever people play God harm results and gut wrenchingly when power is abused verse 10 the wicked don't even get called out on it look at verse 10 then too

I saw the wicked buried those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this this too is hebel isn't that sickening you see the teacher says you can find the unjust even in church they are more than likely to say that they believe in God and they even claim that they do what they do in his name and sometimes they receive the enthusiastic approval of the religious establishment have a look at this poster on the screen this is from 1933 and it is a propaganda poster now what does it say Hitler's fight and Luther's teaching are the best defense for the German people it is a sad truth of history that many

German Christians supported Hitler's policies to the extent that some of them began classifying Christians according to their racial heritage forcing anyone with Jewish blood to step down from any positions of service in the church they saw Hitler as an ally not as an adversary and so the wicked are found in the places of worship they even receive praise from the religious and when they die they get a resounding eulogy that's the conundrum and verse 11 where injustice reigns where the instruments of justice malfunction social decay follows when the sentences of a crime is not quickly carried out people's hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong when people begin to see that the law is paralysed when they begin to think that as long as

I know the right person or as long as I can pay the right price I can get away with anything or that's when society starts to become undone that's the conundrum we face as we live in this world so how what does the teacher suggest we do well let's look at the course wisdom recommends the course wisdom recommends when confronted with imperfect authorities how should the wise act well here comes the surprise verse two obey obey the king's command I say because you took an oath before God why does the teacher recommend such an action well don't forget ecclesiastes chapter five where God says you should fulfill your vows if you've made one don't take your word lightly but just as significantly we are to obey because of who the king is you see it's probably best to place this verse within its covenantal context

Israel's kings don't forget especially those from the line of David are divine appointments God stands behind them so you can't easily divorce their office from God generally speaking to obey God is to obey the king he has chosen and although we no longer live under the same exact covenantal arrangements as the teacher does the broad principle is still the same in general we should submit to authority because they've been established by God and that's why in the new testament we have Romans chapter 13 on the screen let everyone be subject to the governing authorities for there is no authority except that which God has established the authorities that exist have been established by

[13 : 49] God so whether we personally like them or not the powers that be have been placed there by God for his purposes now perhaps that sounds quite counter cultural to our ears submission isn't that an outdated notion but what we need to understand is that authority in itself is not a bad thing from the very beginning God has designed this world such that we come under authority we come under his authority of course but authority is present in just about every sphere

of life that we operate in within our families if we are parents we exercise authority over our children making sure that they shut off the computer when they're supposed to go to bed on time speak to their uncles and aunts politely when we drive on the road we are functioning under authority because we've been told how fast we can go whether we can go in only one direction on that particular street or not and so on and we follow them within our churches we recognize that

God has placed those called overseers in our congregations whose godly direction we submit to and authority is a positive good when the orchestra submits to the conductor's authority they are able to produce beautiful music when a beginner at badminton submits to the coach's instructions he begins to develop into a better player authority when exercised according to its particular place and nature is very much a good thing and so it is wise to submit to authority but I can hear you asking already but wait a minute haven't you forgotten the conundrum that you just described earlier we don't live in an ideal world where the authorities are all amazing and nice and yes that's right and the authors of scripture are aware of that too don't forget that when

Paul wrote Romans chapter 13 a hostile Roman emperor was in charge and don't forget that the person who penned Ecclesiastes 8 verse 2 is the teacher who hasn't been shy to share his observations about wicked oppressors but he still says even if the king's command is foolish even if it looks wrong don't rush straight away into hot headed confrontation verse 3 don't storm out in a rage remember from last week instead how the wise should react look back at chapter 7 verse 9 do not be quickly provoking your spirit for anger resides in the lap of fools so the teacher isn't saying that there is never a time where we might have to disobey the king or the government if that's what it takes to obey

God but he is saying wisdom means playing the long game sometimes an audience with the king especially in the ancient world is never to be taken lightly after all he is the one with all the power he is the one who holds all the cards and the difference between acting wisely and acting foolishly could also be the difference between you getting another chance to influence matters in fact even to live sometimes and no chance at all so don't turn your back on the king in foolish anger provoking him further don't be too quick to pick a fight with your hard hearted boss or push back against your bad tempered teacher and verse three again don't stand up for a bad cause that is don't persist in a lost cause arguing for something that you know the king won't listen to right now the more you argue the more you might dig a deeper hole for yourself so be sensible because verse five that way you will live to fight another day the wise know when to act be pragmatic and you might limit the bad and end up doing more eventual good good now this is something we find again and again in the old testament take the story of

Esther for example here is a powerless Israelite woman placed in a foreign king's harem eventually rising to become the king's companion now that's not as glamorous as it sounds because she's still without her freedom more than that she soon learns that her people are under the threat of extermination no thanks to a malicious advisor who has the king's ear but she is patient she doesn't incite her people to violent rebellion she works the system and the way she approaches the king is noteworthy in particular not once does she ever directly criticize or oppose him instead she waits until God provides an opportunity when one day the king bestowing favour on her asks what can I do for you and even then she responds with submissive language if the king regards me with favour if it pleases the king she uses language like that and she takes her time before making her request for the king to spare her people by skillful politics and within the framework of the

[21 : 10] Persian legal system she and her adopted father Mordecai are able to change the decision of the king king or take a less well known figure Obadiah we're told in 1 Kings 18 that he was basically the chief of staff to king Ahab one of the most evil kings in Israel's history but the first thing we're told about Obadiah is that he was a devout believer in the Lord and because he was a God fearer even while his boss's wife was hunting down God's prophets he was busy hiding them quietly but he does all this within the system not outside of it he's not openly challenging his boss rather he's acting as a quiet agent of subversion you see here's the point remember biblical wisdom is about discerning what is the most faithful and fitting thing we can do in a particular situation and yes for some that would mean working outside the system that's what the prophet

Elijah was doing in Obadiah's day he was the guy holding the monarchy accountable but his is not the only way to serve God Esther and Obadiah show us you can still fear God you can still remain faithful to him while working within a regime that doesn't acknowledge God you don't necessarily or even need to directly challenge authority you can still be godly while submitting to imperfect

authorities in fact Esther and Obadiah and Joseph and the apostle Paul they all show us that this path is actually the more common one there is room for pragmatism but it is what I call a theological pragmatism not a worldly pragmatism you see why is this the cause wisdom recommends well look at verse 6 for there is a proper time and procedure for every matter now remember what the teacher declared earlier in

Ecclesiastes if you go back to chapter 3 you might remember how he said there is a time for everything and more importantly every time and season has been set by God he determines the timing of everything and so the reason why the teacher advocates humble obedience and sensible prudence is because ultimately he trusts that while the king might hold all the cards humanly speaking it is really God who is running the show because the teacher is so confident that God knows what he's doing he can still respect the authority God has put in place in other words our measured response to human authority can reflect our actual trust in God's sovereignty this is not pragmatism in the sense of well what can

I do nothing will ever change just go with the flow no this is a pragmatism that emerges from trusting that God holds all our days in his hands and he's the one to whom the world is accountable and when we know that we can act as wisdom recommends you see though the wise know that there is a proper time for everything verse 6 the wise also know they cannot discern the future verse 7 wisdom is not fortune telling that's why verse 6 again a person may be weighed down by misery the wise still have to make decisions without knowing what the outcome might be and that could potentially cause us anxiety Esther when she decided to approach the king had no idea if she would be successful or not but if the wise remember that

God knows best they can rest if I perish I perish Esther declared and because there is a time for every matter the wise will know when it is time to stand up and go against the human king as occasionally must happen that that's what Daniel's friends did when they refused to bow before the statue that king Nebuchadnezzar had set up and like Esther they also said if we perish we perish we are confident that God will deliver us but if he doesn't he knows best we will still obey the command of the king of the universe not to worship anybody else but him so yes in general we are to submit to the authority

[27 : 12] God has put over us but sometimes there is a time when honoring your non-Christian parents means disobeying them there is a time when honoring God means handing in your resignation and growing in wisdom will help you know when that time has come and so that's the course wisdom recommends but the teacher doesn't stop there he reminds us also of the consolation wisdom offers the consolation wisdom offers remember wisdom is limited but valuable and here is some of its value we've hinted at them already in verse 5 wisdom can protect you from harm relatively speaking I'll take verses 7 and 8 now here is how wisdom comforts us it reminds us that while it is true that the wise can't see the future neither can unjust authorities they might look like they have all the power but they are more limited than they think they can't control the future and verse 8 they can't control nature they have no power over the wind or any other elements of the weather in 1941

Hitler attempted to invade Russia they moved through the western parts of the Soviet Union quickly occupied critical parts of Ukraine and by September they looked like they were closing in on capturing Moscow but the weather suddenly changed roads turned to mud snow arrived tanks couldn't move soldiers were frostbitten and when the Soviets launched a surprise counter offensive the German troops paralyzed by coal could not properly aim their weapons the Nazis failed and this was regarded as a turning point in World War II Hitler powerful as he was had no control over nature and ultimately they have no control over death

Joseph Stalin was another one of the 20th century's most brutal dictators historians believe that he was responsible for at least 15 million deaths but after dinner one night with some of his inner circle he went to bed and he never came out again now apparently his minders were worried about his health but they were so scared of him he had such a terrifying reputation that they didn't dare to enter his bedroom only only only at around 10 30 that night did someone go in and found him on the ground in his pajamas the floor covered with urine he had apparently suffered a stroke some suggest to this day that he was poisoned but anyway this is how his daughter recounted his moment of death this is what she says at the last moment he suddenly opened his eyes it was a horrible look either mad or angry and full of fear of death suddenly he raised his left hand and sort of either pointed up somewhere or shook his finger at us all and the next moment his soul after one

last effort broke away from his body

Stalin came face to face with death and realized with horror he could not win that's the consolation wisdom offers even the wicked cannot control death verse 9 in fact they cannot escape God in verses 11 and 12 it seems as if the unjust person whose sentencing is delayed if he is charged at all God gets to enjoy an extended number of days of freedom if we are following some high profile trials in our country today well we feel this don't we but it is an illusion the teacher says at the end of the day those who do not fear God verse 13 will not even get one extra day more than what the Lord allows as the commentator Philip Ryken puts it the shadows lengthen at the end of the day but the wicked cannot prevent the nightfall of death so wisdom tells us relax God is in charge yes imperfect and even unjust authorities abound but don't be afraid of them fear God instead don't face the world today as those who have no hope obey the king where you can and verse 15 just get on with enjoying all the gifts God has given you no one can comprehend everything verses 16 and 17 not even the wise but that's okay because if you could comprehend God fully are you certain then that God is really God and if you're a

[33 : 16] Christian today you can rest especially in the comprehension the gospel brings the comprehension the gospel brings I think this is where God's word wants to finally lead us to this morning you see as we look at the world as we face the conundrum of injustice and powerlessness we have to admit that yes it is virtually impossible to comprehend it all well that's how the teacher feels in verses 16 and 17 but actually the fact that we find the existence of injustice incomprehensible in the first place upsetting in the first place should strengthen our belief in God rather than the other way around let me explain I know that we had a lot of World War II anecdotes today but let me just give you one more the

English poet W.H. Auden grew up Christian but as an adult he became a convinced atheist but one evening in 1939 he went to see a documentary of the Nazi invasion of Poland and what he saw sickened him as he watched all the evil stuff that the Nazis did on the screen he heard the cheers of the Germans in the theatre and that threw him off and he realised he wanted to condemn Hitler as an evil man but without any belief in an absolute moral law giver what basis did he have for condemning Hitler he began to realise that to even call injustice injustice God must come into the picture after all only those who believe that there is a good

God would find injustice upsetting if you don't believe in the existence of a good God then why would you be troubled by the existence of injustice it just is it's just how the world works and this realisation started Auden on his journey back to Christianity and that's what the gospel affirms there is such a thing as good and evil God is good and we are evil we are enslaved by evil if this was not true then there cannot be such a thing as the gospel and here is the wonderful comprehension the gospel brings the gospel shows us that God is not ignorant of this evil he's done something about it he sent his very son Jesus into this unjust world and his son alone carried all power and all authority he demonstrated his power by his control of the wind and the waves he alone had the authority to decide the time of his death and John 10 shows us how

Jesus uses that authority here is John chapter 10 verse 17 to 19 the reason my father loves me is that I lay down my life only to take it up again no one takes it from me but I lay it down of my own accord I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again this command I received from my father well this is how Jesus uses his authority not as human kings do he uses it to lay down his life for the sheep willingly sitting through an unjust trial to take the punishment he did not deserve and he uses it to affirm that he is the risen king to whom every day everyone must one day bow even the powers of evil cannot overcome him and one day he will bring about final justice and because the gospel is true that's why today we can rest easy that's why we can live wisely obeying human authorities even imperfect ones whenever we can that's why we can pray for all authorities as 1 Timothy 2 commands us to so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and that's why if the time ever comes when we have to disobey any earthly authority we can have courage because we know the one who wields ultimate authority who uses that authority for our good whose very name is love and justice combined you know in

Christ we have become the children of God and just like young children don't fully comprehend everything neither do we but if young children know that their parents love them and they're in charge that's enough for them and though we can't fully comprehend the nature of our world if we know God is in charge and he loves us that's enough so let me allow the teacher the last word ecclesiastes chapter 8 verse 1 who is like the wise who knows the explanation of things a person's

wisdom brightens their face and changes his heart appearance let's go to the king of kings now in prayer father as we come today we want to say you are on your throne you are the one who is the alpha and the omega you are the one who is in charge help us to remember that especially when it looks like other people are in charge when evil people are in charge when foolish people are in charge help us to put our trust in you by submitting to the authorities of this world in a way that acknowledges your sovereignty and give us wisdom to know what time it is when we should act in this way or that way give us wisdom so that we might live godly lives for you all this we pray in the name of

[40 : 08] Jesus Christ Amen