

Living wisely within our limits

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[0 : 00] Let's pray and let's ask God for his help. Father, this morning we need the help of your Holy Spirit.

We need your illumination. Please help us to make sense of what we have just read in your word. Father, help me to say the words that you want me to say and help me not to say the words that you don't want me to say so that we can really internalize your word and let your wisdom shape our outlook on everything from life to death and beyond.

So Father, please be here today by your Spirit working in our hearts. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Well, this morning we've reached the halfway point of Ecclesiastes and I would love to know what you make of it all.

I haven't had too many conversations with you yet about what God is teaching you or how God is challenging you or how this book might be prompting you to think more deeply about life and I would love to hear about that.

So please do come and chat with me afterwards about Ecclesiastes or ask me any questions if you've got them. But since we're at the halfway point, it's a good time to recap what we've seen so far.

[1 : 19] Ecclesiastes, we know, are the divinely inspired musings of a man known as the teacher. He could be King Solomon. And if he isn't, he's at least someone who styles himself as a Solomon-like figure.

And his big thesis is found right at the beginning of this book in 1 verse 2. Meaningless. Everything is meaningless is how the NIV puts it.

But as we learn from the first sermon in this series, the word meaningless is actually the Hebrew word hebel, which literally means breath, vapor, mist.

And to keep it simple, while the metaphor has multiple layers of meaning, we boil it down to basically two things. To say life is hebel is to say it's ephemeral, fleeting, here today and gone tomorrow, just like the puff of smoke coming from a birthday candle.

And it's to say that life is enigmatic, impossible to grasp sometimes, just like the wind. It slips through your fingers. And that's life in this present age, by its very nature, hebel.

[2 : 35] And so the big question that the teacher has been asking is this. In such a hebel world, what gain is there to be had? Is there any gain in seeking pleasure, or possessions, or even the best education?

That's what he's been exploring for the last few chapters. And what is his conclusion? Well, look at the end of chapter 6 verse 9. This too is hebel, a chasing after the wind.

That's what he realised. To pursue money, or pleasure, or many other similar things, for gain, is a futile project. And so right at the halfway point of this book, the teacher begins to ponder a slightly different question.

Just look at 6 verse 12 with me. For who knows what is good for a person in life during the few and meaningless days they pass through a shadow.

In other words, if life is so hebel, is there anything worth looking for? Is there anything good here at all?

[3 : 52] Perhaps there is. After all, the teacher knows that God is still present in this world. And he still gives Genesis 2 benefits in a Genesis 3 world.

We can still receive gifts of food and drink, satisfying work, and satisfying friendships. We saw that earlier. And we can be wise.

For the next four chapters, the teacher now turns his attention to the subject of wisdom. In chapters 7 to 10, you will see that wisdom words keep popping up throughout.

For now, the teacher ponders, could wisdom be the answer to 6 verse 12? Could wisdom be what is good for a person's life in this hebel world?

And in typical Ecclesiastes fashion, the answer in chapter 7 is going to be yes and no. And so let's get into today's passage and we're going to approach it in a slightly less linear fashion today, meaning that I'm not going to start at verse 1 and then work our way through sequentially.

[5 : 07] Instead, I'll look at this passage a little more thematically, which I hope with God's enablement will help us to grasp better what God is saying to us through this passage. And so the first thing that the teacher wants to tell us about wisdom is this.

Wisdom is valuable. Wisdom is valuable. Jump down with me to verses 11 and 12 for a moment. Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun.

wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter. But the advantage of knowledge is this. Wisdom preserves those who have it.

So, there you have it. Being wise, the teacher says, is worth it. After all, it can give protection. It's like money in that sense.

So, just as having enough money can protect you in a time of rising inflation, or ensure that you can still pay the rent during a time of unemployment.

[6 : 16] So, wisdom can protect you by ensuring that you don't act foolishly in a time of complexity. This past week, Europe was hit by a record heat wave with London reaching 40 degrees Celsius.

Well, wisdom, the teacher says, acts like a shade when the sun gets really hot ensuring that you can survive life's heat waves.

Or take verse 19 where the teacher once again invokes the value of wisdom. Look at verse 19. Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful than ten rulers in a city.

Now, later on in chapter 9 verses 14 and 15, the teacher will tell a little parable about how a man saves a city from a powerful king. And how does he do so?

By his wisdom. And we find a similar story this time of a wise woman saving the city at the end of 2 Samuel chapter 20.

[7 : 23] So that's the power of wisdom. It puts more strength in one person than ten men who command governments and armies. Well, no wonder then the teacher sings the praises of wisdom in chapter 8 verse 1 just beyond our passage today.

Who is like the wise? Who knows the explanation of things? A person's wisdom brightens their face and changes its hard appearance.

Wisdom can even be transformative. And wisdom is exactly what we need to live in this Hebel world.

Now, as a pastor, people occasionally come to see me to ask for advice on various issues. You know, pastor, here's the situation, here's the problem.

What should I do? And the truth is, often, there is no black and white answer. You see, God did not create this world or even our lives simply as a set of rules to be followed.

- [8 : 29] world. Now, of course, there is such a thing as right and wrong. And in that case, where we know what is right and wrong, the Bible expects us to do the right thing.
- But because God has made this life so wonderfully rich and multifaceted, there are many situations where God doesn't give direct commands.
- For instance, there is no rule telling you whether you should go and spend time with your friends today or you should just rest at home. There is no rule about whether you should send your child to that extracurricular activity or not.
- There is no rule about whether you should give amount X or Y to that worthy ministry. And so we need wisdom. And biblical wisdom is all about skill in living according to God's design.
- Knowing God's wisdom is more than knowing what is true or false, right or wrong. It is discerning what is the most faithful and fitting thing to do in any given scenario.
- [9 : 40] And so to take an example, just come with me to Proverbs chapter 26 verse 4 on the screen. Do not answer a fool according to his folly or you yourself will be just like him.
- and you think, yeah, yeah, okay, sounds like good advice. I'll follow that. But then look at the very next verse, verse 5. Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes.
- Eh? So which is it? Should I follow verse 4 or verse 5? And the answer is, it depends. one is fitting for one kind of situation, another is fitting for another kind of situation.
- And it is wisdom which helps you to know which is which. It helps us figure out what to say or not to say to that hurting or drifting friend.
- It helps us figure out whether to take this job or not take that job. it helps us how to figure out how to parent children who are different or how to work with colleagues who are indifferent.
- [10 : 55] And that's something money and even power can buy. No wonder wisdom is valuable. And it's something that we all instinctively desire.
- A couple of weeks ago, I was just chatting to our church librarian, Aaron, and he told me which book has been the most borrowed title so far this year. Do you know what it is?
- Well, let me give you the title. It's called The Wisdom Pyramid. And it's a book about how to live wisely in a media-saturated culture. So that tells me that we instinctively know wisdom is valuable and we crave for it.
- But hang on a minute. This, after all, is Ecclesiastes and if we've learned anything by now, it's that the teacher knows how to surprise us. So just as we are about to get ready to go all out to pursue wisdom, he says verse 16 to us, don't be overwise.
- Want to pursue wisdom? Well, watch out. You might be destroyed. My goodness! You never imagined that the Bible would say something like that, would you? Has the teacher gone mad?
- [12 : 15] Whatever does he mean? Well, we will come back to verse 16 later on. But for now, let's just make a simple point. Whatever it means, it shows us that wisdom is not the be-all and end-all.
- And this brings us to the second thing that the teacher now wants to show us. Wisdom has limitations. Wisdom has limitations. How so?
- Well, here are three ways it is limited. Firstly, wisdom is limited because it cannot make right a crooked world. Let's come back and look at that verse that we looked at earlier, verse 19.
- Let me read it again. Wisdom makes one wise person more powerful than ten rulers in a city. Sounds great, doesn't it?

Pursue wisdom and you'll be really strong. But let's dig a little deeper. What does this verse assume? Simple.

- [13 : 25] It assumes that those who are ruling over you right now are not wise. They are fools. And further more, it suggests that even though one is wise, he doesn't necessarily get into power.

He doesn't necessarily get elected. Now that sounds familiar, doesn't it? Isn't that how the world is like? I'm quite certain, whatever country they are from, that sometimes people look at their rulers and they ask, how in the world did so and so manage to get so many people to vote for them?

How in the world can this person who built so many white elephants be in charge of managing our country's economy? How in the world did this guy manage to climb up so high up the ladder when every other week the newspapers report him as spouting out some careless and irrational words?

No. The wise are not necessarily those who get to direct the affairs of nation, the company, or even the church sometimes.

And sometimes it is the fool who does so. But that's how bent out of shape our world can be. This is hebrew and even wisdom can't overcome this.

- [14 : 53] And so wisdom is limited because it cannot make right a crooked world. But there's an even deeper issue, which brings us to our second limitation.

Secondly, wisdom is limited because it cannot make right our crooked hearts. Verse 20. Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.

There is not a single person, the teacher says, who is consistently good or who loves God and neighbour with his entire being at all times.

Need a working example? Sure, the teacher says, let me oblige you. Verse 21. Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you, for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others.

others. This, the teacher says, is reality. You might not like it when people say not so nice things about you behind your back, but be honest.

- [16 : 11] As you people watch, don't you do the same? Don't you sometimes make comments about others in your heart, which if God were to run it through his hard x-ray machine, would qualify as gossip or slander or as being motivated by bitterness or envy?

And here is his big point. Wisdom doesn't necessarily stop your heart from acting like this. Wisdom might possibly make you more self-aware that your heart is not working properly, but it can't perform heart surgery.

it can't get rid of your sin. In fact, the reverse is true. Sin can poison your wisdom.

Look at verse 7. Extortion turns a wise person into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart. Even a wise person, the teacher says, sometimes ends up doing what he shouldn't do when pressured or tempted.

For a wise person still can't fix his own soul. Wisdom is limited because it cannot make right even our crooked hearts.

- [17 : 39] And thirdly, wisdom is limited because it cannot change the destination of our crooked paths. That's a theme that's running throughout this chapter.

verse 2, for instance, tells us that death is the destiny of everyone. Verse 15 tells us that even the righteous perish. Verse 17 suggests that there will come a time when we will all go to the grave.

And wisdom cannot do a thing about it. Verse 12 tells us that wisdom preserves those who have it. But that turns out to be a relative statement, not an absolute one.

You see, wisdom can indeed add years to your life because when you are wise, you understand that you need to take care of your body. You make decisions, that means you have financial stability.

You bring your kids up well, that means that they will never cause you worry. Wisdom is beneficial. But as an experienced undertaker sometimes, does he worry that if everyone became wise, he would be out of a job?

[18 : 56] Or talk to the doctor? Does she think that wisdom is the magic solution that would empty all of her hospital beds? No.

Because in the end, wisdom by itself provides no solution to death. It cannot change the destination of our crooked paths.

So wisdom is limited. And indeed, we can summarise all we've said so far in the words of verse 13. Consider what God has done.

Who can straighten what he has made crooked? Certainly not wisdom on its own. Because here is another surprise.

You know all the limitations that we've heard about so far? Well, it's been put in place by God. He makes the straight crooked.

[19 : 57] Well, no wonder we can't change it. It's all part of his plan, his workings in this world. How so? Well, let's consider.

when exactly did God make crooked what was straight? Well, to see that, we have to go all the way back to the beginning. And what we will see is a world of incredible beauty.

Everything is in its place, as it should be. The sun and the moon in the sky, the fish and other marine creatures in the sea, a man and a woman in love with one another, as one flesh, and enjoying uninterrupted communion with God.

Everything is straight as it were. Or in the words of the teacher in verse 29, God created man upright.

But verse 29 also tells us what went terribly wrong. Mankind have gone in search of many schemes.

[21 : 09] The word translated schemes here, the commentator Craig Bartholomew tells us, refers to human inventions, a planned and technically conceived activity which is often wrong, ineffective, and evil.

So that's what we got up to, stuff that is wrong, ineffective, and evil. And so because God is straight and not crooked, because God is upright and not corrupt, and above all, because God is love and not indifferent, he has to take action.

He has to name evil as evil and expose our schemes as they really are. In the words of Romans 8, verse 20, he has to subject the world to frustration, to show us that our human schemes actually lead us to bondage, not freedom.

He allows the consequences of our sin to take root. Or, to use the words of the teacher, he has to make straight paths crooked.

There are now bumps paths and potholes and dead ends and strange bands on the highways of life to make us realize that our schemes are vastly inferior to God's plan.

[22 : 40] For it is human schemes that are the source, not the solution, to the big problems of injustice and corruption and racism and sexism.

That's what we must recognize. And even wisdom cannot fix it all. Wisdom is limited because it has no ultimate remedy to the issue of Hebel.

So what do we do with these twin truths? How can it produce good in our lives today, if at all?

Well, for the remainder of our time, let's consider how the teacher applies what he teaches. And we will consider two paths that he recommends to us. The first of those paths is this.

If wisdom is valuable, then let death put us on the path of wisdom. If wisdom is valuable, then let death put us on the path of wisdom.

[23 : 48] And that's basically what he's teaching us at the start of this chapter. In verse 1, the teacher begins with a classic wisdom saying, a good name is better than fine perfume.

Oh, yes, yeah, that's right, isn't it? Now we can absolutely see the logic of that. What's the point of spraying Chanel number 5 all over yourself if you leave a bad taste in everybody's mouth?

But then we read on the second half of verse 1. And the day of death is better than the day of birth. What's going on?

This doesn't sound like wisdom anymore. Last week, someone shared with me that she was expecting a child. And I don't think she would appreciate it if I told her, by the way, here's some wisdom for you.

The day of death is better than the day of birth. So what is the teacher getting at? Well, let's read on, verse 2.

[24 : 49] Let's make clear first what the teacher is not saying.

He is not saying that it's always better to mourn. He is not being anti-pleasure here. Ecclesiastes has already made clear that he does enjoy stuff.

And so he's not recommending Christians to be all doom and gloom. And certainly the Christ that we follow has no problem with feasting since he shows up at a wedding in Cana and even accepts an invitation to a Pharisee's dinner party.

So what's the teacher's point? Well, imagine, he says, if I told you, let's go grab lunch at that fancy new French restaurant in Saradise.

And my treat. Well, that would be good fun, I'm sure. Especially for you, because I'm the one paying. But suppose I then tell you, let's go spend an afternoon at the SIB burial ground, or perhaps at the Nirvana crematorium.

[26 : 07] In the long run, which would bring you more benefit? And actually, it is the latter.

For death and funerals and times of sorrow have a way of removing many distractions and can help you focus on what really matters in a way that a hundred lunches at classy restaurants will never do.

The Canadian writer David Kane helps us understand this. In 2018, he attended an event at Danforth Avenue in Toronto.

Now, the evening itself was quite ordinary. As he was early, the event hasn't started yet, he went to go and let park a little bit at the nearby park and the nearby shops, and he remembers distinctively stopping in front of a church building to tie his shoelaces, you know, very ordinary.

But two weeks later, on exactly that same street, including in front of that church building, there was a mass shooting in which 14 people were shot and two killed.

[27 : 30] Now, rationally speaking, Kane said, well, he shouldn't feel anything because there were two weeks in between him being there and the shooting. But it still sobered him.

He couldn't stop thinking, I was there. It could have been me. I could have been killed. And so death made him consider his ways in a way nothing else could.

And that's why verse three, a sad face is good for the heart. That's why verse four, the heart of the wise is in the house of mourning. It's not because the wise are morbid.

Rather, it is because death invites you to stop being superficial and indulging in matters that are trivial. When you know you will die, you will let that coming day reshape your priorities, your aptitudes, what you long for, what you pray for.

You will be someone deep, not someone shallow. And you will be single-minded, not distracted. Because you will invest your days for Jesus, knowing that you have just one life to give him.

[28 : 55] Well, that's what death does. Focus our minds in a way that nothing else can. As the poet Robert Browning once wrote on the screen, I walk a mile with pleasure, she chattered all the way, but left me none the wiser for all she had to say.

I walk a mile with sorrow, and never a word said she, but oh, the things I learned from her when sorrow walk with me.

So, verses 5 and 6, pay attention to the rebuke of the wise, not the fool. Be willing to listen to those who have faithfully walked with Jesus in every season.

And surely that would include listening to people like the Apostle Paul, wouldn't it? To all the authors of Scripture who have walked with Jesus in every season.

Be patient, not quick to anger verses 8 and 9 because although the words of the wise might be provocative at times, they lead to a better outcome.

[30 : 09] And verse 10, don't fall into sentimental nostalgia if it means being in denial of the present. Recognize instead your impending death and live for eternity instead.

let death show you how to be wise so that you can navigate your way around the highway of life with all its potholes and road blocks.

And that is still better than nothing. That's the first path the teacher recommends. Here's the second path. If wisdom is limited, then put your ultimate trust in the Lord instead.

If wisdom is limited, then put your ultimate trust in the Lord instead. Let's return now to that puzzling statement in verse 16.

Do not be over righteous, neither be over wise. Why destroy yourself? And I suppose it might help a little if you realize that in the original Hebrew, that word over comes from the root word for gain that we keep seeing throughout this book.

[31 : 27] And so the teacher isn't advocating for moderation as if it's good to do a little bit of righteousness and a little bit of evil. Instead, the basic gist of verse 16 is something like this.

Don't try to be righteous or wise in a purely transactional sense, where you think that it would give you an advantage over others.

Don't think that you can control life by mastering righteousness and wisdom. Don't think that it will make you need God less. After all, verse 15, wisdom and righteousness doesn't guarantee how your life will turn out.

A faithful, godly, upright, even wise Christian in Ukraine might still have his life cut short. A foolish, evil, totally pagan human being in the United States might live up to a hundred.

And so, if you pursue righteousness and wisdom purely with the expectation that it would give you your best life now, you'll be sorely disappointed.

[32 : 44] You will go mad trying to gain what you cannot get. Because remember, wisdom is limited. It can't fix everything.

And you are limited too. That's the basic point of verses 23 and 24. You are far too limited to grasp wisdom completely anyway.

It's too far from you. It's too deep for you. And that is also probably the point of verse 28. We know that the teacher is not incompetent.

You know, with effort, he can find one upright man among a thousand. But he cannot find lady wisdom, which is the upright woman likely being referred to here in verse 28.

So then, what is the best thing for us to do? It is to do this. It is to stand before God and humbly acknowledge that he is God and we are not.

[33 : 58] It is to receive every moment from him, whether happy or sad, as something given or permitted by him for our good. Look at verse 14.

When times are good, be happy. But when times are bad, consider this. God has made the one as well as the other. We all struggle with why a good God allows certain things to take place.

We can't work it out. We can't work out why it happened that way. And we certainly can't work out what the future is as a result. It is not accessible to us.

We can offer theological answers and some are better than others, but we cannot fully solve the mystery. Let me tell you a story.

Thomas Boston was a pastor and theologian who lived a few centuries ago. He faced suffering in his lifetime. his health was not very good.

[35 : 08] His wife's health was also not very good. And not only that, he lost six of his ten babies. But here was perhaps his greatest trial.

At one point, he had lost one of his sons named Ebenezer. Now, if you know your Bibles, you would know that Ebenezer comes from 1 Samuel, which means the Lord has helped us.

And so when his wife gave birth to another son, he thought, why not call him Ebenezer as well? Why not testify to their hope in God's goodness, in the hope of resurrection in this way?

Why not say, we have lost one son, but the Lord has helped us? And so he did. He named that son Ebenezer. But soon the child was sick, and despite his prayers, the child died too.

He had lost not just one Ebenezer, but two Ebezers. Who can fathom this?

[36 : 23] What is God up to? We don't know. And neither did Thomas Boston. But this St.

Thomas Boston would go on to preach a famous sermon called A Crook in the Lord based on, you guessed it, Ecclesiastes 7 verse 13. You can still get it in book form today.

And among many profound insights, this is one of the things he preached on the screen. The truth is, the crook in the Lord is the great engine of providence for making men appear in their true colours, discovering both their ill and their good.

And if the grace of God is in them, it will bring it out and cause it to display itself. it so puts the Christian to his shifts that however it makes him stagger for a while, yet it will at length evidence both the reality and the strength of grace in him.

In other words, Boston says, it is in bad times that we truly discover if people are truly holding on to the grace of God or not. It is then when we discover whether the gospel is a living reality in our lives or not.

[37 : 46] And by the way, I'm not finished with my story yet. That was just an introduction. You see, who I really want to tell you about is another pastor, a Singaporean one called Pastor Vernon.

I've met him before and believe it or not, he actually came to our Sunday service a few years ago when he was on holiday in Kuching. But we are more acquaintances than friends.

And right at the beginning of this year, his church did a sermon series on Ecclesiastes too. And he preached on this very chapter.

Not only that, he just told this exact story about Thomas Boston and his Ebenezees that I just told you. And he told his congregation, we need to learn a healthy frustration.

We should mourn at the way that life can be so crooked. But at the same time, we can keep looking to God. God a few months after he preached that sermon, he and his wife made an announcement.

[39 : 06] They had been looking forward to another day of birth, the birth of their third child this November. It was meant to be an announcement of life. But their little and as yet unborn baby had just been diagnosed with a fatal condition and unsephaly.

And straightaway they knew this was their crook in life. But could they say the day of death is better than the day of birth?

Could they adopt the heart of the truly wise? Could they now preach that exact sermon to their own hearts? Could they themselves look to God?

Well, listen to what they write in their announcement. We grieve this news, though not shock that life as a Christian will come with suffering and pain.

While we were waiting to see the doctor, we were flooded with specific instances of the many, many ways God has been preparing us for this season. God is so gracious and so good.

[40 : 17] And so we are at complete peace about our lot in life. We know that our sovereign God has in his complete sovereignty chosen to give us this precious little one and has committed to carry us all through this season.

How can they trust God? Because ultimately they know Jesus. They know the cross. And they know the cross which looks like complete foolishness which looks like complete nonsense is actually the very wisdom of God.

And that very wisdom that looks like foolishness proclaims that God loves us. He is good to us even when the day of evil comes.

And so they can come under the shelter of that cross. They know the one whose day of death was indeed even better than the day of his birth.

They know the one who was destined for death not because he did anything wrong but to do what wisdom cannot which is to fix our sin. They know the one whom according to the prophet Isaiah according to John the Baptist would make the crooked path straight and the rough ways smooth.

[41 : 41] Luke 3 5 and 6 they know the one upright man who pleases God the Father and in whom all the treasures of wisdom can be found. They know Jesus.

Do you? Do you know Jesus like this? You might not be a Christian today. You might have called yourself a Christian for decades.

But whichever camp you fall in, I leave you with the same question. Do you know Jesus like this? Do you want to know Jesus like this?

Well, if you get nothing else from today, then take away this. The absolute wisest thing you can do today is to make this your life's ambition to know Jesus more and more.

then you can respond like Pastor Vernon and his wife. Then no matter how crooked your road of life becomes, you can be assured he will make your path straight.

[43 : 01] That's the way of wisdom in this Hebel world. Do you know Jesus? let's pray.

Let's pray. Father, we just want to come under the shadow of your wings once more.

We want to come under the shelter of the cross. Father, we pray, Lord, that you will help us to make this our life's ambition, to leave what is behind, to strain onto what is ahead, so that we might know that to die is gain, to live is Christ.

We pray that that would be what you will put into our hearts this morning, so that we can live truly wise lives, even as we wait for that new creation where nothing is about.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.