

Oct 4 Ecclesiastes 5-8

Chapter 5

Vs. 1-8, The Teacher recommends a mindset of humility before the Lord. To LISTEN is better than to sacrifice or to make promises one will be unable to keep. The Teacher says that because God is in heaven, and we are confined to earth, God has the advantage of seeing all the possible eventualities that could befall a person. God knows that we will not be able to keep our vows, even before we know it ourselves, and even if we have the best possible intentions of keeping them. It is better to LISTEN than to speak many empty words. Vs 8-9 speak of the evil of oppression and injustice as being part and parcel of a hierarchical, bureaucratic society. The Teacher's confusing verse means that having an ordered society is better than having no order at all (thoroughly agrarian), but best by far is having a responsible elite who will prevent gross injustices from occurring in the first place.

Vs 10-20, The Teacher now turns his attention back to the premise of wealth. He says that people should be content with what they see in front of them, rather than striving to acquire for the sake of acquiring. Riches are constantly under threat of being taken away through the various absurdities of life, but if one can still "see them with their eyes" then they likely still possess them and should enjoy them. Better to be a slave and sleep soundly, than to suffer a rich man's insomnia, worrying over "stuff." The Teacher then describes a scenario in which a rich man spends his life hoarding wealth, worrying about it, driving himself to acquire more and more, and never enjoying it during his life. Then, through the absurdity of our world, an event happens that takes all his wealth away (a natural disaster, a lost business deal, the stock market, a lawsuit, medical debt, lots of possibilities). He's left with the most pitiful lot of all, not only did he never enjoy his wealth, but he's left with nothing to pass on to his heir, so all his toil was utterly in vain. The counterpoint good scenario is for a person with wealth to eat and drink and to enjoy the process of toil and its rewards, before they slip away. Though our days are few in the grand scheme of things, each and every day is of value and is an opportunity to enjoy this good life that God has given us. The goodness of life itself is not dependent upon our circumstances or the absurdities of the world.

Chapter 6

Continuing the theme of the last chapter, the Teacher names the greatest evil and absurdity in the world being a person unable to enjoy that which they have (years, children, property). He argues that it's better to have never lived a day than to waste one's days by not enjoying what one has.

Chapter 7

The Teacher begins this series of proverbial saying by noting that one's reputation (name) is more valuable than fine oil (that's expensive!). The day of one's death is preferable to the day of one's birth because when a person dies, they can no longer damage their reputation, their name is secured in the annals of history. Vs 2-6 are best understood by recalling the Teacher's basic premise of how wisdom affects human beings. 1:18 "In much wisdom is much vexation, those who increase knowledge increase their sorrow." Therefore, since it is God's will that we seek wisdom, but wisdom makes people melancholy and causes vexation, it is better for a person to be in a house of mourning, full of irritation and scowling, because that shows that one is actually paying attention to what's going on in the world and increasing in wisdom. Merrymaking is different from joy. Merrymaking suggests a drunken carousing, which only serves to dull the senses to the absurdity of life. Vs. 6, A fool's speech is loud and good for nothing, much like thorns crackling in the fire. Vs 9, "anger rests in the fools bosom" the Hebrew for this is that of a baby nuzzling in its father's chest. Anger is a fool's baby.

Vs 16-20, The Teacher wrestles with the reality that the righteous may live but for a short time, and the wicked may live a long life. This appears to be an injustice and a paradox, yet more absurdity. But the Teacher bucks against the traditional wisdom that excessive righteousness reaps excessive rewards. He takes a more measured approach, implying that all people are a mixture of wicked and righteous. That we should not be TOO wicked, nor should we seek to be TOO righteous (or rather, self-righteous).... It's ok to be fully saint and sinner. It's ok to accept that we are human beings.

Vs.25-29, This passage is irredeemably misogynistic. The Teacher says he examined a thousand people and he only found one who was a truly wise human being, a man, the rest were dumb animals. Only 1 man in 1000 is wise, and he found no women who were wise. It's possible that he meant this as a kind of misogynistic joke, and so it may not carry the same gravitas as the more important verses of this book.

Chapter 8

Vs. 1-9, The Teacher begins this passage by stating “it is prudent to put on a cheerful face before the ruler” since a cheery disposition denotes contentment with the King. A wise person will not truly be happy in the presence of a despot, but a cheerful face will at least ingratiate them to the ruler as a means of self-preservation. However, the Teacher cautions that one cannot truly hide on the outside how one feels on the inside. Vs. 1-5 involves practical wisdom about how to interact with a king. Vs. 6-9 reflects on the futility of trying to predict the future or control one’s own fate, this is as futile as trying to control the wind.

Vs 10-17, The Teacher laments in this section about the lack of justice in our world. While God’s eternal justice will prevail, the absurdity of our world is that the wicked are praised at the time of their deaths, while evil deeds go unpunished. Meanwhile, the righteous are treated the way the wicked SHOULD be treated. This is absurdity. Because of this absurdity, the Teacher recommends that people should take what enjoyment they can get when they can get it, because we can’t trust that we’ll be rewarded for our righteousness. He then continues to talk about the frustrating nature of wisdom: the more we seek to know and to become wise, the more we realize that we will NEVER come to know everything there is, only God is truly wise.

Oct 11 Ecclesiastes 9-12