

WHAT'S THE POINT?

the gospel according to Ecclesiastes

“The Value of Wisdom”

Ecclesiastes 9:11-18

This past week, I was made aware of a pastor of a large church who is under scrutiny because it seems as though he's manipulating his church and taking his leadership too far. Obviously I don't want to listen to any “mud” that's slung at someone, but this time I took some time to investigate this pastor and his church. I quickly discovered that he teaches and encourages what I refer to as the prosperity gospel. This past week, his church has been hosting revival services, and in their promotional video, they have the words of one pastor saying this: “God says this revival is not about maintaining where you are. It's about supernaturally catapulting you into a new dimension whereby which when you speak, devils must bow down, sickness must leave your body. Hey! Somebody give God a shout!”

When I hear that, I get angry. I think about the little child getting chemotherapy; but clearly the revival hasn't hit him because he's still sick, yes? This viewpoint of God prospering your health also extends into other arenas of life, like money. If you give to God financially, he's give you more financially. The claim is that God wants us to experience all blessings – including financial ones. So, what happens when someone is broke? Obviously, they're at fault somewhere. And probably the first answer is to give to someone else so you can get more back.

Now I know that I'm barely explaining this prosperity gospel; but it's a sickening “not real” gospel. The good news ends up focusing on what God gives you and not on God himself. If I were to say, “God wants to give you \$1 million, will you just trust him?” Who wouldn't want that? But do you want God or just the money? You see, this so-called “gospel,” mainly focuses on how he prospers you – either mentally, physically or financially – and not on how God gives salvation, forgiveness and reconciliation with him. In the end, it either puffs up people who do really well in life. Or it causes those who are sick and poor to eventually despair. This is why I hate this message. Whether or not the accusations against this pastor are correct, I despise what he proclaims.

But here's something else I'm concerned about. I think most of you in this room probably agree with me that this so-called gospel is not helping people see and savor God as the supreme treasure and delight. However, I think even in our circles and in our own lives, we can tend to embrace what I would like to call a “veiled” prosperity gospel.

We hear things like, “If you eat these kinds of foods that God made, then you shouldn't get sick much.” Or, “If you start off your day reading the Bible, you're going to feel so much better in the day.” I remember testimonies of people who would basically say that. Then people who would say, “If you just follow these financial principles, you'll be out of debt and you'll experience God's blessings like I've experienced it.” I still remember a man who had been in debt, talked about how he got out of debt and then now how he has money to spare.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. Reading your Bible, getting out of debt and taking care of your body are all good things! But isn't this just a veiled prosperity gospel? Instead of focusing on God and our reconciliation with him; we have emphasized other benefits above him.

What if you read your Bible and in that day a close friend betrays you? What if you eat the right foods and you're sick all the time? What if you try hard to get out of debt and then you lose your job? Was following God still worth it? To put it another way, **"Is God still good when all you get is God and the blessings he decides are best for you?"**

As we've been studying the book of Ecclesiastes, I hope we're all seeing that we cannot place our identity, life and meaning in the things around us. This world is affected by sin, and the effects of sin are everywhere. That means everything is broken and nothing in this life is certain. There is only One constant. There is only One who remains the same. There is only One on whom we can rest all our hope: God himself.

Yet I think many people might think, "Really? But what about a job? What about money? What about a spouse?" For whatever reason, our sin-cursed minds don't grasp the fact that the maker of all of this is infinitely superior than all this stuff he made. So, this is the emphasis of Solomon, and that emphasis will come to full fruition at the end of Ecclesiastes.

Right now, though, Solomon has slowly introduced the need for fearing God and hence trusting him. To fear means to know his glory and to not want to dishonor him. No matter what happens, God is worthy to be followed. That means that even if you do all he says, but then you're struck with life-threatening cancer; God is still worthy and your following him was still good. Again I'm reminded of my friend whose child died after a week of being born, and when I asked him how he was doing, he responded by saying something like, "God is the only One I can turn to. Where else can I go?" It's the other friend of mine who carried his child's casket and at his funeral, I believe we sang, "Blessed Be Your Name." It's the couple who continue to praise God even though they barely have a penny to their name. It's the spouse who forgives the other spouse after grave hurt. It's the endurance of the person who for whatever reason struggles with depression but fights to persevere in God's grace.

Listen, those situations are not *prosperity* gospel. Those situations confess that God is worthy. God is the prize. But don't turn this into an anti-blessing gospel. Sometimes when people are hurt in life, they try to keep themselves from enjoying God's gifts. Don't do that. Blessings will come in various forms, and we need to enjoy those blessings and praise God for those blessings; and that's precisely the point. God is the One worthy of all the praise.

But now why do I say all of this as we gather to study the Word this morning? Why address this veiled prosperity gospel mindset? It's because as we move into a larger section of Ecclesiastes, Solomon is going to emphasize the goodness of wisdom despite the results. And, he's actually going to say that you could be wise and actually receive rejection. However, wisdom is still better than foolishness. Why? Well, before we answer that question, let's read from Ecclesiastes 9. Please go there and I want to start reading in verse 11. Let's pray before we move into the text.

¹¹ Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. ¹² For man does not know his

time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them. ¹³ I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. ¹⁴ There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. ¹⁵ But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. ¹⁶ But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. ¹⁷ The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. ¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. ¹

As I think about the purpose of this section (or any section of Scripture), I have to think about the context. In other words, if I'm wondering what Solomon is saying, I can't forget that there are verses before this and verses after this. This all fits together to form a *whole* argument. As I think about what's before this and what's to come, I think (at least in part), Solomon is encouraging us to **Fear God and leave the results to him**. In this portion, Solomon is going to show us the value of wisdom as well as its vanity "under the sun." And yet he still maintains, wisdom is good.

The reason I say "Fear God," is because Solomon has already encouraged us to fear before God. He has contrasted foolish people and wise people and then he has connected those who fear God with those who are wise. It's true that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Therefore, when we read Solomon talking about the value of wisdom, we have to connect "fearing God" with that wisdom because Solomon has been moving us away from a worldly wisdom to a godly wisdom. This wisdom is a gift. It's good, and it's better than foolishness even if it's thwarted "under the sun" and you don't get the results you think should come as a result of being wise.

Now, Solomon gives us three reasons to fear God and leave the results to him: 1) life is unpredictable, 2) man's approval is unpredictable, 3) the results of wisdom is unpredictable. Let's start with the first statement.

1. Life is unpredictable (vv. 11-12).

You may remember these verses because I preached from them last week. While they connect to previous statements, I also want us to see how they move us forward, too. Let's read these verses again together: ¹¹ Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. ¹² For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them. ²

Solomon had just concluded that we are to rejoice in the gifts of God. And then he quickly reminds us that there are still going to be difficulties. Just because you've decided to "follow Jesus" does not mean that now life's an easy road. You may not win the earthy races. You may not win battles. You may not have as much food. You may not be rich. You may not be liked.

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 9:11–18.

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 9:11–12.

Life is unpredictable. Solomon says “time” and “chance” happen to us all. The word “time” means that the next moment may not happen the way you want it. And it comes at you whether you like it or not. Have you ever had your plans get thrown out the window? Have you ever gone about a day and you thought to yourself, “Well, that’s not what I had planned today”? Have you ever gone through a day where you felt like you spun your wheels working hard and yet you didn’t hardly accomplish anything? Time happens. We only get one chance to live each second. No make-ups and do-overs. That’s why we shouldn’t be surprised that the Bible will say that we are to make “the best use of the time, because the days are evil.”³ That’s very “Solomon-sounding,” isn’t it? Time happens to us. It’s coming for you whether you like it or not. And it’s going to make you age and experience joys and trials alike. So, make the best use of that time.

But “time” isn’t the only thing that happens. “Chance” happens, too. Remember that the word “chance” is not talking about blind chance. But instead, from our perspective, this word seems to have two types of meanings. First, it means that from the perspective of “under the sun,” we can’t figure out why everything happens. But secondly, this word “chance” indicates a suddenness of the difficulties that come into our lives. Things can seem to be going our way. We’re mastering our fate. Then, all of a sudden, the storms of life come in. It happens as suddenly and unpredictably as a swimming fish gets caught in a net or a bird gets caught in a snare.

This happens in the small and the big of life. It’s when you’re making plans to “enjoy your wife” for a date night and then she gets sick. You had plans and they fall through. Or, it’s like what happened this past week with my family. Tracy and I were just getting ready to go for a run and then I get a call from my mom to get to the house right away because something’s happened to dad. A stroke was clearly not on anyone’s radar. There was no warning. Yet, in the midst of the tears and the pain, I also praise God for the words of Ecclesiastes in my mind, reminding me of God’s truth.

Time and God’s providential “chance” happens to us all. Whether you’re wise or a fool, you cannot control your life. It’s unpredictable. But before you think this is all bad news – remember that we also like “underdog” stories. David was not the strongest in battle and yet God worked through him to defeat Goliath. You may not be the fastest runner, but somehow endurance can help you to win the race – or at least make it to the finish line.

Solomon’s point isn’t to make us despair. Stating the unpredictability of life should then cause us to look higher – to see what matters most and to trust God. We tend to think that we have to have a big savings account or great smarts or a nice car, nice house, nice spouse and nice kids and then everything’s going to be fine. But the unpredictability of life tells us otherwise. Everything is affected by sin and the fall. Therefore, we ought to fear God. He and he alone has a myriad of ways he can work and no matter how he chooses to work; he’s always good. As Psalm 145:17 says, **“The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works.”**⁴

Life may be unpredictable, but God is not. Therefore, trust God, fear God and leave the results to him! But life, in general, is not the only thing that’s unpredictable. The approval of people is unpredictable, too.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Eph 5:16.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ps 145:17.

2. Man's approval is unpredictable (vv. 13-16)

Let's read verses 13-16 again together: ¹³I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. ¹⁴There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. ¹⁵But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. ¹⁶But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. ⁵

Solomon is emphasizing his point that time and chance happen to everyone. Within this example, Solomon highlights the fickle character of human beings. Yet, a person's or society's response to wisdom doesn't negate the value of wisdom.

So, Solomon gives an example of wisdom "under the sun." The way this is worded, Solomon isn't merely giving a parable, but he's saying that he's literally seen this. And when he says "it seemed great to me," he's saying: "Here's an example that I think is particularly helpful." You know, if Solomon thinks this example is helpful; it's probably helpful. But knowing he's writing this under the inspiration of the Spirit, we can definitely say we ought to take heed to this illustration.

So, what's the scenario? Little city, few men. Great King, great armament and plans. Immediately we see a problem, right? Who's going to win? From all external opinions, it's going to be the great king and his army. But if Solomon's point is that life is unpredictable.

What we may not see is that it's unpredictable in multiple ways. We read that within this small city, there was a poor man who also was wise. Now, for whatever reason, we as human beings judge books by their covers. We usually think if someone is poor, they got themselves into that mess, and they're probably not very smart. But that's not so. There are plenty of poorer people in the Scripture who were also wise. So, here we have a wise, poor person. We should immediately see that Solomon's wanting to highlight this underdog. And in our minds, we're thinking, "He's going to do great things!"

We read on and the ESV (along with most other English translations) say that this poor man "by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man." Then we read again in verse 16 give the conclusion: wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard. ⁶ Wait a second, Solomon says that the poor man's words were not heard. They had to have been heard if his wisdom saved the city, right?

It seems as though most people might simply assume that verse 16 means that after the saving of the city, the poor man wasn't listened to. That could be the interpretation of this verse. But I'm not convinced. If you have a New American Standard Bible, look at your footnote. It gives another possible way to translate verse 15. Instead of saying that he delivered the city, it could be translated "he might have delivered the city." Another English translation called the NET Bible actually translates it this way.

If this is the case, then Solomon is saying that there was a poor, wise man in the city and nobody wouldn't listen to him. Sure, he could have saved the city; but no one would hear him. He was despised and rejected by the society. Nobody listened to his words and no one remembered him.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 9:13–16.

⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 9:16.

We benefit from compliments, don't we? We want to hear "well done." We want to know that we're successful in what we're doing. If you're in a job and no one ever gives you any affirmation and actually ignores you, you might become quite discouraged in your job and you'll start thinking, "What's the point?"

Isn't this kind of what Solomon is leading us to think. You think that wisdom is going to get you an "in." You might even have wisdom that will save a whole city! People need you. Yet nobody gives you the attention you think you deserve. Is being wise worth it if nobody gives you attention?

This makes me think of other biblical stories like Joseph. When we read his story, we can tend to think that because his story can be read in 20 minutes or less than his trials probably weren't that bad. But have you stopped to remember that from the time he was taken from his brothers to the time he saw his dad again was about 20 years? And while we can say "Well, he was raised up to the second place in Egypt," you have to remember all the years of difficulty and also the fact that he probably would have traded that to be with his father.

But let's go to a sadder picture of the prophets in the Old Testament. Here were wise men. Someone like Isaiah was called to prophecy to God's people and God said Isaiah's work was going to be one of "cutting down" the trees. In other words, his prophecy is going to reveal the hearts of the people and there are only going to be few who respond. This was a continual response to the prophets. They were right. People rejected. So, what good is being a prophet if people aren't going to listen to you or follow you? Shouldn't wisdom lead to people's acceptance of you?

Well, if you pursue wisdom so that people will think you're so smart or if you do what you do so that people will like you, then you're seeking meaning and life from people. And, if what Solomon has already said about people is true (which it is), then people are going to fail you. And if you're living for their acclaim, you will *always end up being disappointed*.

Wisdom is not some tool for you to manipulate for your own self-centered purposes. And this should convict so many of us here in this room – myself included. How many of you have ever had a prideful thought because you knew an answer to a Bible question that others didn't know? I have heard many occasions from men that when they preach, they have to fight this ugly pride that comes in wanting people to be impressed with their wisdom. I have to fight that. It's sickening because what we're doing in that moment is negating God's grace in allowing us to know a certain truth. And, we're seeking acceptance from people. Wait a second, God has accepted us. Why are we grasping for people's waffling acceptance?

But this doesn't just happen with teachers. This happens in parenting, for example. How often do your children really express their gratitude for you and what you do? They're like the foolish people in the city. Oh that they would listen to mommy, but they won't!

Is being wise worthless? Absolutely not. Solomon says in verse 16, "wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard."⁷ Even if no one listens, know that wisdom is better than might. How can it be? Take your Bible and turn back to chapter 7:19. That verse

⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 9:16.

says, “¹⁹Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city.”⁸ Physical strength isn’t as strong as the internal strength that wisdom can give you.

Wisdom can give you the ability to keep keeping on. Even when people don’t listen to you or give you attention? Yes. Wisdom gives you a resolute focus to persevere with endurance. How? Because again, remember that according to the Bible, godly wisdom is connected with God. Therefore, wisdom in-and-of-itself is a gift of God and should be enjoyed. In addition, this wisdom came because you see the majesty and glory of God and do not want to dishonor him. Therefore, God is the point of all you do – not human beings acclaim. Don’t fear humans, seeking never to disappoint them. Fear God and leave the results to him! Or, as Jeremiah writes in Jeremiah 17:5, **“Thus says the Lord: ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord.’”**⁹

To place all your trust and hope in man means you’re cursed. To be wise just to get people’s approval is a cursed position to be in. And, by the way, in case that word “cursed” doesn’t mean much to you, it refers to being rejected by God. To make “flesh” your strength means you’ll be destroyed in the end because flesh can’t save! Only God can save.

So, fear God, not man. Embrace wisdom as the gift that it is. Leave the results to God. Finally, Solomon gets to one more point:

3. Wisdom is vulnerable (vv. 17-18).

This point has been emphasized earlier, but I want to highlight it more in these verses. Read verses 17-18 with me again: ¹⁷The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. ¹⁸Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.¹⁰

Here again we have a contrast. You have a loud-mouthed leader who yells amongst fools. Some people tend to think that the louder you yell means you win. Actually there was a study done that said that people who yell seem to “win” more arguments. It’s not that they’re right, but people will bow to them. Is that the kind of leadership you want? Husbands who abuse through words. Pastors who simply get angry and put people down so that they can maintain leadership. Bosses who show sinful anger to get their workers to work harder. Listen, the Bible says that “the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”¹¹

In contrast to the loud-mouth leader, we have a wise person who’s heard in quiet. This either means that the person himself is quiet. Or it could mean that it’s quiet because there’s not a lot of people gathered around the wise person. Either could be understandable.

What’s the point he’s making then? Foolish anger can make a big splash and can give you a lot of control over people. Quiet wisdom may not gain a huge following, but it’s better for all because as verse 18 says, “Wisdom is better than weapons of war.” In other words, the wise can quiet the conflict. If we can gain peace through words or treaties, let’s do it. Or, on a smaller scale, in arguments with other people, seek to wisely listen. This was a huge lesson for me to learn especially in the earlier years of marriage.

⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 7:19.

⁹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Je 17:5.

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 9:17–18.

¹¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Jas 1:20.

When thought everything was something huge that had to be fixed immediately. Almost any disagreement had to be worked through with tenacity. Many times we would discover we didn't disagree, it was just in how we were talking. Other times, looking back, I can say, "Who cares if we disagree on that point." And through the year, by God's grace, we realize more how important it is to listen, listen and listen. And it's so important to ensure that we're thinking about the good of the other person – not just whether or not I think I'm right.

In all arenas of life, quietly hear what the other person is saying. A loud-mouthed fool doesn't care about others. He or she cares about control. The wise person cares about the people. It doesn't go straight to war.

In some ways, it would seem to make sense to end the sermon on this note, but then Solomon inserts this: but one sinner destroys much good.¹² Why is that coming in?

Well, we've been encouraged to cling to a wise way of living and to be wise people. In that exhortation, sadly, we can quickly cling to wisdom in and of itself and then forget God. And, as a result, simply have an appearance of godly wisdom, but deny the power behind the wisdom.

Listen, under the sun, wisdom isn't going to guarantee ease or greatness. Instead, Solomon rehearses this vain truth: sinners can destroy what wisdom brought about. As we look at this world, we can see this. Hitler's regime is a good example. Or you can look at any society throughout history, how many times it started with amazing roots and then deteriorated through excessive sinful practices. But then you can look at one situation and one man. Even consider Solomon's great kingdom and then his son comes in and divides the kingdom. One fool can destroy a kingdom of peace.

And so, Solomon writes in 10:1, "Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor."¹³ Get a couple dead things in perfume, the perfume isn't pretty any more. You could say then that if wisdom can be taken down by sin, then sin must be superior. But again, don't judge things on the basis of what you can see. Wisdom is still better than foolishness even though sin can outweigh it in this vain, unpredictable world.

As I think about this, I wonder how God-fearing, wise people could cling to hope while reading Ecclesiastes. But I know that Ecclesiastes points people to hope. Remember that when Jesus taught his disciples about how to interpret the Bible, he said that the Scriptures (throughout the whole Old Testament) were written to testify of Jesus. That includes Ecclesiastes. And I think we can pick up on the pointers to the gospel even in this text.

Trust God and leave the results to him? Think on this. Who wasn't just wise but actually the wisdom from God? Who wasn't just knowledgeable or strong or swift. Who was knowledge, wisdom and strength? And who was the One who also came in wisdom, teaching with grace and truth, and yet was despised and rejected of man? While many listened to him at first, by the end of his life, he silenced himself like a sheep before its shearers is silent. Instead of listening to Jesus and worshipping him as the Savior of the world – the One who rescues us from our sin and also will redeem this world from its vanity – they sent him to be crucified. Did you know that they did that to try to guarantee that he was

¹² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 9:18.

¹³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 10:1.

“cursed of God.” The Bible says that a “hanged man is cursed by God.”¹⁴ They wanted people to look at this Wise One and think God would never accept him. Yet, in Jesus’ sacrificial life and death, he not only saved a town, but he is the Savior of the world!

Yes, Jesus was cursed. But he became sin who knew no sin so that we could become the righteousness of God. **He took our sin and our curse on himself. Our curse for living for people’s approval over God’s approval. Our curse for loving the things around us more than him. Our curse for trying to get everything out of this life instead of serving and following God. Jesus was cursed for our sin. And then in his death, while it looked like he was swallowed whole by it; he rose from the dead! Yes, it seemed as though good had been overtaken by the foolishness of the people around him. And clearly the dead flies stunk up all the good that Jesus did! But Jesus rose from that grave and conquered death and hell. Because of Jesus’ sacrifice, now anyone who trusts him is reconciled to God, and has God’s wisdom.**

This is the gospel according to Ecclesiastes.

But there’s more. I want you to hear this very carefully. Where we want to hear people approve us or we want circumstances to affirm us, did you realize that now those of us who follow after Christ will hear someday, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Jesus says to all who follow him, in his most famous sermon, “Blessed are those who. . . .” We who follow Jesus are blessed – no matter what the circumstances! Will you hear the words “Well done?” Can you simply imagine that scenario with me for a moment? Before the hosts of heaven and all the saints through the ages in transcendent splendor God speaks to you and says, **‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’**¹⁵ Ponder those words.

While wisdom might be despised in this vain world – those who fear God and leave the results to him have only eternal glory to look forward to. But not just glory in things. Glory in a God who loves you.

You can trust God. You can leave the results to him. Godly wisdom is better than foolishness because God is superior than all!

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¹⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Dt 21:23.

¹⁵ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Mt 25:23.