

Ecclesiastes 7:13 - 8:17

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Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[0 : 00] Well, a friend of mine has made it clear to me that he doesn't want to be a Christian. He's given the matter significant thought. He and I have discussed it at great length late into many evenings.

! And he says to me that he simply will not become a follower of the Lord Jesus. His reason? Is it that the idea of sin is too offensive? The ethics of the Christian morality that come with declaring that Jesus is Lord and that you're going to submit your life to him? Is it that he doesn't want to be seen as a bigot? That's a common thing in our culture today. Is it the time commitment? Sunday is a great day for cycling after all. It's none of these. Here's his reason. It's all too tidy. It's all too tidy. He thinks the Christian answers to the problems of the world are too simple.

Christianity has plenty to say to the problems that we see around us. There are answers to the big questions. There are lots of answers.

[1 : 20] But that's the problem. For him, the answers explain away reality. It's all just a bit too clean and tidy. Someone once offered that old navigator's line to him that God loved him and had a wonderful plan for his life.

And his reply was, does he? Do you know that? Can you be certain? To which the person said, um, uh, uh, and that was it.

The thing is, in light of what Solomon told us last week, we might agree with his response. Prosperity, we saw, and adversity are not always what they seem. Prosperity may be a curse in comfortable clothing, Solomon told us.

And adversity may actually be among God's greatest blessings. It's not obvious what's good and what isn't good in the plan of God.

There are plenty of options out there in the culture offering us the steps that we need to take to master this thing called life. Life hacks, we call them. Do the right thing, avoid the wrong thing, and you'll crack the code to life.

[2 : 30] You've just got to discover what the right thing is and avoid what the wrong thing is, and you'll crack the code. Life, love, happiness, they will flood your way. Now, in the church, we might, of course, be tempted to sneer at this, to open up the book of Ecclesiastes and remind people what we've been learning.

This life is vapor. However, any attempt to game the system of life in order to gain for yourself will ultimately prove a fool's errand because that's not how the world works.

Look at the book of Ecclesiastes. I've been learning this. But the truth is we have our own Christian versions of this kind of thing where we tell people that the Christian life can be lived by simple steps that if you follow them, they will deliver the results that you want.

Happiness, success, confident and strong faith in the face of the struggles of life. Say your prayers, serve others, share the gospel, pursue wisdom, live a righteous life.

And if you do that, God will deliver a long and happy life in return. Now, those disciplines, of course, are good things. Of course they are.

[3 : 39] But the expectation that by living that way obligates God in some way is a mile off. Now, I doubt that we would say this out loud.

I doubt that we would talk in that way ourselves. But let's be honest with ourselves. How close is this way of thinking to our expectations for how God should work in the world and more particularly in our lives?

You'll be able to tell the answer to that question by the way that you respond when God doesn't deliver for you according to your wishes. Grumbling and bitterness.

When those two things are present in our lives, those things reveal dashed expectations. Grumbling and bitterness come up because the expectations that we have for life haven't been met. Well, what we discover this evening is that it's this approach to the Christian faith that Solomon takes to task in our passage. His point is this. God can't be controlled. He can't be manipulated. [4 : 41] He can't even be fully comprehended, however much wisdom we might accrue. God's ways are simply full of mystery. And there are no easy answers to the complexity of life in the world that he has made.

It is simply not tidy. For my friend to think that the answers that the Christian faith offers to the questions of the big questions of life and the problems of the world, it's too tidy. He doesn't understand. And of course, I've explained that to him. But that's his thing. That's his idea. It's all just a bit too clean and tidy. And what we discover this evening is that the mystery, the fact that there are no easy answers to the complexity of life, is by design. Have a look at 7 verse 14. This is all by divine design. In the day of prosperity, be joyful. And in the day of adversity, consider. God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

7 verse 24. Have a look. All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, I will be wise. But it was far from me. That which has been is far off and deep.

[5 : 58] Very deep. Who can find it out? Chapter 8. Over the page, verses 16 and 17. When I applied my heart to know wisdom.

Verse 17. I saw all the work of God that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out.

Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out. Despite all Solomon's wisdom, fully grasping what our sovereign God, who is in heaven, chapter 5 verse 2.

Fully grasping what he is doing is simply beyond even Solomon's wisdom. So any portrayal of the Christian life that purports to have all the answers is out of step with this reality.

And our pursuit of wisdom needs to take this into account as well. And this evening Solomon asks us, verse 13, chapter 7, to consider the work of this God.

[7 : 00] So that we accept this. So that we accept that he can't be controlled or manipulated or even fully comprehended. And then respond to him appropriately. Respond to him as we should.

And Solomon identifies three areas where however much wisdom we might have, we still find God's providence perplexing. We still find God's providence perplexing.

When number one, we see the good suffer and the bad prosper. Chapter 7 verse 15. In my vain life, I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evil doing.

We are perplexed when we see the good suffer and the bad prosper. And we see this kind of thing all the time. A faithful Christian couple who are set on serving the Lord among the unreached, they get married, and the young wife falls ill and dies on their honeymoon.

All the while, the child sex trafficker lives in luxury. The Christian parents who lose their baby at 20 weeks, while the poor and barren lives a long and comfortable life.

[8 : 19] It's not just in life and death. The principle is also true in life in general. The kind-hearted, faithful woman who wants to raise a family for the glory of God, but who can't conceive.

They pray and pray that the Lord might give them children, but every month it's just another reminder that he hasn't. All the while, the drug-addicted lady who lives in the hostel down the road keeps having children that have to be taken away from her.

The righteous man who gets fired because he doesn't play off his politics. Meanwhile, others sleep their way to the top. Why is the world like this? Solomon has sought out as much wisdom as he can in the conclusion.

If something is crooked, then the Lord has made it so. Verse 13, And what God has made crooked, let no man think that he can straighten out. No one, but no one, can bend the universe in a different direction to that that God has done.

This is one of the central themes of this book. God brings the prosperity, and he brings the adversity. And when the day of prosperity comes, we are to receive it as a gift from him with thankful hearts.

[9 : 33] And verse 14, have a look. When the day of adversity comes, when the good suffer and the bad prosper, we remember that God gave both days, and we trust him. The Lord brings the

sunshine, and he brings the rain.

He brings the laughter, and he brings the tears. The birthday and the day of death. And there's nothing you or I can do about this. So, in light of that, in response, Solomon warns us, verse 16, Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise.

Why should you destroy yourself? He's obviously not suggesting that we don't pursue righteousness. He's warning against the pursuit of performative righteousness. Put on righteousness. Fake righteousness.

Un-Christian righteousness. Unrighteous righteousness. He's saying, don't do that. And don't, similarly, don't pursue wisdom, thinking that that wisdom will unlock the answer to this divine mystery.

One way we can be tempted to do this is the Luke 13 and John 9 thing. Do you remember? Luke 13, a wall falls on people and lots of them die. John 9, the man born blind.

[10:51] And what do the people say? Well, is it their sin, or is it the sin of others? That must be the answer to this conundrum. It must be because they behaved sinfully in some way. And in both cases, Jesus says, no, no, no, no, no.

Because God's ways are not something that we can second guess. Solomon is warning us against a kind of Christian faith that has us in the driver's seat and is either put on or presumptive about what we know and what we don't know in a way, well, he says it's simply absurd before the God of all the earth.

But performative Christianity, second guessing or knowing better than God won't help you grasp the mystery of God's providence. So don't try. But then don't go the other way either, verse 17.

Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? Don't just, when things don't go your way, when things are difficult, when you're perplexed beyond belief, don't just throw the head up and say, well, it doesn't matter how I live.

If God's in control of it all anyway, what does the way I live matter? Actually, it's going to make no difference in the end. This can be a temptation, can't it, when things are tough?

[12:15] Of course, again, we might not say it out loud, but there's a hardness that grows in our hearts, isn't there, when God doesn't work according to our desires. And here's the thing. When that's the case, it is a quiet rejection which, if left unchecked, will grow into a loud and obvious rejection somewhere down the line.

Rejecting righteousness and pursuing folly are not the answer to the perplexing reality of God's ways. We are not in charge.

We are not to be self-willed, either in evil or what we define as good. Solomon says this is the way of self-destruction. So we struggle when we see the good suffer and the bad prosper.

This is also the case when, secondly, point number two, we see the general, the universal nature of sin. When we see the general nature of sin.

That's what Solomon's describing in verse 20. Verse 20, chapter 7. Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you.

[13:26] Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others. All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, I will be wise, but it was far from me. That which has been as far off and deep, very deep, who can find it out?

Again, look down at 29. See this alone I found that God made mankind upright, but they have sought out many schemes. Not only are God's ways beyond our understanding, but so is the human condition.

There is no sinless person on the face of the earth. There is no one who is consistent all the time. There is no one who doesn't seek out many schemes, many ways of sinning.

And however much Solomon has given himself to what can or cannot be found out. Do you notice, as Paul read the passage, that to find out or found out. It is a recurring theme.

He's gone looking for what we can know. Verse 14, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29. What can be found out? He comes back empty handed.

[14:33] Can't work out why sin is so pervasive. Do you ever ask yourself these questions? Why do I do these things all the time?

Why do I keep doing them again? I know that they're wrong. I know that they're destructive to me and to my relationships. But I just keep doing them. It's just me.

What am I saying? Why did I just, why did I do that? Why did I say that? Why did I not just tell the truth in that totally innocuous question?

Did you get my call earlier? Did you see that I rang? Did you get my missed call? No, I didn't notice. Why do you do that? Maybe it's just me.

And we look at other people who are choosing to do things that are hijacking their lives. Wrecking their marriages. Doing untold damage to their children. And we think, why would you do that?

[15:37] Solomon says he searched diligently for an answer. But no one can find it out. Not him. Not anyone. But what he wants us to see.

Is that this inability to find an answer. Is the paradox of wisdom. That is. Quote. One commentator who says this.

Wisdom finds out the most important truth. By finding out it cannot find out much. About fallen human nature. Let me give that to you again. Wisdom finds out the most important truth. By finding out it cannot find out much. About fallen human nature. We all know that people are sinful. We all know that we are sinful.

But none of us can explain or comprehend sinful human nature. However. However. It's when we accept that. That we are able to deal with others in light of that truth.

[16:38] Think about it. When someone lets you down. You are not surprised. Surely this doctrine of sin should help us in this way.

When someone lets you down. You don't go. Huh. How on earth is that possible? It might be your husband. It might be your wife. Or a friend.

Or an elder in the church. It could be anyone. Sooner or later. They will fail you. Because of the general. And ineradicable sinfulness of the human heart. I am often. I have to say.

Struck by how shocked and offended people are. When someone sins against them. And I have had to give myself a good talking to. On this point at times as well. What did you expect Reuben? I am not suggesting of course.

That there is no such thing as serious and destructive sin. Nor am I saying that we can't be really really hurt. By other people's actions. But I am talking about the. How could they say that?

[17:34] Or. I can't believe they were so thoughtless. And we get crushed. By these things. Of course they could say that. Of course they could do that.

They are a sinner. Just like you. And just like me. So perplexing as this might be. Solomon gives us. A realism here. That we need to embrace.

He is saying that Christian wisdom. Requires us. To reflect carefully. On Luke verse 25. On the wickedness of folly. And the foolishness. That is madness. Literally the stupidity of sin.

And the madness of folly. He wants us to reflect deeply. On that. And to calibrate. Our expectations. Of others. Accordingly. We shouldn't expect perfection.

We shouldn't expect utopia. In this life. So don't write people off. Because they're sinners. Cancel culture does that. Cancel culture does that.

[18:35] And it's hypocritical. And it's naive. It's hypocritical. Because it doesn't acknowledge. That we're all sinful. And it's naive. Because it believes. That a kind of utopia. Is possible. Here. And now.

We can't. As the church of the living God. We can't write people off. Because they got something wrong. We of all people. Expect that. We understand it.

We should know that. And to write people off. Is the way of folly. It's the way of lady folly. As Solomon describes her. In verse 26. And following. And I find something more bitter than death. The woman whose heart is snares and nets. And whose hands are fetters. Remember this is wisdom literature. Solomon embodies wisdom and folly.

In two women. One is virtuous. And one is adulterous. So the woman described here. Is actually lady folly. Folly is the thing that ensnares. And shackles those.

[19:28] Who listen to lady folly. Lady wisdom. By contrast. Understands the ubiquitous nature of sin. And understands that. No matter how hard you try.

Sinful human beings. Are beyond searching out. Why do people do what they do? It's a mystery. We struggle when we see the good suffer.

And the bad prosper. When we see or we experience. The general nature of sin. And then. Thirdly. And much more briefly. Solomon identifies. Another perplexing reality. Chapter 8.

Verses 11 and 12. That is the perplexity. Of when we see. Great injustice. When we see. Great injustice. Chapter 8.

Deals with how the general effects of sin. In humankind. Requires a social order. With rulers. And the associated authority. And submission. Rulers have their authority. From God. And those who are subjects. Are to obey that.

[20 : 28] Authority. But as you would expect. Because of the way sin runs through. Every single human heart. Those rulers will sometimes. Or often.

Get things wrong. That also applies for parents. And church leaders. As well as civil governors. It's true. In each of the. Governments that God has established. Because each of them.

Is overseen. By people. Who have sin. Running through their heart. But again. Solomon highlights. The frustrating. And perplexing. Nature of this. Look at verse 11. Chapter 8.

Verse 11. Because the sentence. Against an evil deed. Is not executed speedily. The heart of the children of man. Is fully set to do evil. Though a sinner does evil. A hundred times.

And prolongs. His life. He's saying. Because evil is not punished. Directly by God. It can seem like. Those who do it. Get away with it. Solomon has seen people.

[21 : 20] Commit. Sin. A hundred times over. And still seem to prosper. And again. We might ask. What on earth. Is going on here? But in this case. There's a much more. Tangible answer.

It's there in verse 13. Have a look. But it will not be well. With the wicked. Neither will he prolong. His days like a shadow. Because he does not fear. Before God.

This is a call. For patience. And a confident faith. In God's final justice. It's the same point. The Lord Jesus made.

When he warned about. The wicked servant. Who beat. His master's servants. Because his master was delayed. In Matthew 24. Jesus says. In that situation. The master of that servant. Will come on a day.

When he does not expect him. And at an hour. He does not know. And will cut him in pieces. And put him. With the hypocrites. In that place. There will be weeping. And gnashing of teeth. Matthew 24. 49.

[22 : 13] To 51. Every single injustice. That we see. Or experience. Now. Will one day. Be resolved.

Why God allows it. In the present. We don't know. It will one day. Be resolved. Just because a sinner. Does evil.

A hundred times. And prolongs his life. Nonetheless. That does not mean. That he gets away. With his wickedness. And if we seek.

To pursue justice. In every single case. Of evil. This verse 14. Is also vapor. We. Won't be able to do it. So the question is.

Well is that it? We can't find out. What God is doing. In the unfolding of history. His ways. Are not our ways. His thoughts. Are beyond. Searching out. The end.

[23 : 07] Is that it? Well those things are true. But they should not paralyze us. They should not cause us. To be cynical. About the world around us.

To throw the head up. And say. Well it doesn't really matter. How I live. Actually. God's doing it all. His own way. I can't work it out. I'm just going to live my own way. Instead Solomon tells us.

How we should respond. And it's a thread. That runs through. The whole. Section. When we experience. The perplexity. Of this life. Under the sun. What Solomon says is.

We should humble ourselves. To fear God. God. That's where Solomon directs us. Chapter 7. Verse 18. It is good that you should take hold of this.

And from that. Withhold not your hand. For the one who fears God. Shall come out from both of them. Chapter 7. Verse 26. And I find something more bitter than death.

[24 : 08] The woman whose heart is snares. And nets. And whose hands are fetters. He who pleases. Fears God. Escapes her. But the sinner is taken by her. Chapter 8. 12 and 13.

Though a sinner does evil a hundred times. And prolongs his life. Yet I know that it will not. It will be well with those who. Fear God. Because they fear. Before him. We should meet.

The limits. Of our understanding. The boundary. Of our wisdom. We should submit. How little we know. Of God's ways.

And we should surrender our desire. To control our circumstances. All. With the fear of God. That is. We meet. The perplexity.

With reverence. That he is due. We love him. We worship him. And when we do that. We are free to trust him. Without trying to figure everything out. We don't actually need to know.

[25 : 06] What God is doing in the world. In the specifics of our lives. And all that is going on. Around the place. Now of course. We don't just disengage. Completely. Stop thinking about it. Stop praying about it.

Stop seeking to care for those. Who are struggling. And so on. Of course not. We don't actually need to figure out. The plans. Of our sovereign God. What we do need to do.

Is fear him. And alongside the admonition. To fear him. Solomon adds his favorite refrain. Verse 15. It is like. It is like a bell. That rings every week. For us now. Isn't it? And I commend joy.

For man has no good thing. Under the sun. But to eat and drink. And be joyful. For this will go with him. In his toil. Through the days of his life. That God has given him. Under the sun.

We can't figure out. God's ways. But the one. Who has come to him. In faith. The one. Who has had their sins. For given. Through the shed blood. Of the Lord Jesus. The one.

[26 : 02] Who has had the burden. Of God's judgment. Lifted. Can set light. To the worries. Of this world. And we can enjoy. The good things. God has given us. We can.

You can. Enjoying what God gives. In the midst of injustice. And tyranny. Is possible. But don't just take Solomon's words.

For it. Remember the Lord Jesus. Words to the disciples. Who faced the sadness. Of his departure. He's saying to them. I'm going. I'm going to leave you to it. And you're going to really suffer.

And it's going to be awful. John 16. 24. Jesus says to them. Truly. Truly. I say to you. Whatever you ask of the Father. In my name. He will give it to you. Until now.

You have asked nothing. In my name. Ask. And you will receive. That your joy. May be full.

Injustice.

[26 : 56] And tyranny. Are awful. The perplexing presence. Of sin. Everywhere we turn. Is exactly that. It's just. It confounds us again.

And again. And again. And yet. There is joy in it all. For the one who knows. The Lord Jesus. We can receive all the gifts.

That God has given. From his hand. And rejoice. We don't need to know. All the answers. The Christian life. Doesn't afford us. Tidy answers.

It's not. Too tidy. My friend. Is simply wrong. But while it doesn't afford us. Tidy answers. It does afford us. Joy. So come. And welcome.

To the freedom of life. In Christ. Let's pray. Let's pray.