

11. Living Humbly with the Transcendence of God

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[0 : 00] and to the passage that we read there. And it's all about living humbly with the transcendence of God. I began last week with a quotation from Charles Dickens.

Here's another one from Oscar Wilde this time. A man's face is his autobiography. A woman's face is her work of fiction. Maybe not quite as profound as the last one, but, oh dear, I'm going to be in trouble at the end of the service, I can tell.

And anyway, with men's grooming these days, such a big business, it's probably not as true as it once was. But at any rate, it serves us to remind ourselves that the whole of this section in Ecclesiastes, from chapter 8, verse 1, right through to the end of where we read, in chapter 9, verse 10, is all about faces that tell a story.

And it's about the wisdom and the true faith that makes the difference between allowing life to give you, on the one hand, a hard face, or on the other, developing for you a shining face.

Verse 1, A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed. There are people, and there are Christians, who go through life with all its puzzles, and perplexities, and pains, and allow their hearts to become bitter, and resentful, and hardened by it all, by the manifest injustices of a sinful world.

[1 : 28] It's so unfair. That's their refrain. And of course, it is unfair. But they just are unable to come to terms with it. And so life's injustices fester away at the deepest level of their personalities, and it takes root in them, and it takes hold in them, and it can be seen, even in their faces.

They have hard faces. They're unhappy Christians. And almost always, because of that, therefore, they're unfruitful Christians. Because they don't radiate hope, they radiate despair.

They don't radiate gracious forbearance. They exude a spirit of griping, of dissatisfaction. But there are also Christians, and I've known many, and I'm sure you have also, who though they also have lived life with all its pain and perplexities, often with many great hardships, and real injustices, nevertheless, their faith proclaims a very different message.

Because they tell of hearts that have learned the grace of true contentment. They've allowed the injustices of this life to do their work within them, to refine them, and to hone their faith, and to teach them richly of the grace of the gospel, which still looks to the future for a great salvation to come, and can therefore rejoice in that hope of glory, even amid the mess of this present world.

There are Christians who have learned the message that James speaks of as he opens his letter to the New Testament church, when he says, Count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

[3 : 11] And they have done what he says, let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. In other words, they've come to terms with mortal life in this world, as it really is under God, even for Christian believers who follow the living God, who know that they have an assured salvation in Jesus Christ.

They've come to terms with reality. But it isn't easy, is it? It can't be easy. Otherwise, there wouldn't be so many Christians who aren't like that, who are discontented, who lack joy, whose faces are hard.

But friends, if you don't want to become that kind of Christian, a hard-faced Christian, you have to come to terms with the real world. And with real and realistic Christian faith.

You must, because if you don't, if you try to hide from reality in a fantasy Christianity, a kind of Christianity that pretends that everything will be rosy as long as you do the right things or say the right prayers or attend the right church, then one day, your fantasy is going to collapse under an avalanche of reality.

When some of the real crises of life hit you head on and you just can't anymore pretend them away. Let me tell you, fantasy is no protection from reality in the end.

[4 : 38] I promise you that. It's far, far better to come to terms with life as it really is and the life of faith as it really is now. That's the only way to strength in the Christian life.

It's the only way to survival in the Christian life. And it's the only way to real joy in the Christian life also. Well, that's what these chapters are all about and we saw last time clearly that the first thing we have to come to terms with is the manifest injustice of a sinful world.

The world is as it is because of God's sin. It's not God's fault. Remember chapter 7, verse 29? God made man upright. But, they sought out many schemes. And that's the world as we see it and know it, isn't it?

We can't deny it. Chapter 8, verse 9 is the world that we live in where man has power over man to his hurt. It is an unjust world. And it makes us so angry sometimes, doesn't it?

Verse 12. Man has power over man to his hurt. Therefore, a sinner does evil a hundred times and yet prolongs his life. The wicked, the exploiters, the unscrupulous, so often in life they prosper, don't they?

[5 : 53] And it makes us angry. Rightly so. And it's so unfair. Well, yes it is. But that is the way the world is. And you see, the wise believer, the one who has grasped the true Christian gospel, sees and knows just how pervasive and how vast is the tragedy of human sin.

He doesn't try to minimize it. He faces reality. He knows that the colossal disaster of the fall of man can never be put right just with a few pious words and prayers.

Never. He knows that it can only be through the recreation of the whole universe when at last it's set free from its bondage to decay.

Nothing else can ever put right the manifest injustices of this sinful world until the world is utterly remade. And if you're a wise Christian believer, you accept that.

And you live with it. You live patiently with the tragedy of sin. You live patiently with a world that is messy. But you can do so because you know the whole story.

[7 : 05] It's expressed, isn't it, in chapter 8, verses 12 and 13. Do you remember? It will be well ultimately with those who fear God. Not so, though, for the wicked. In the ultimate sense, their days are just like a shadow because they don't fear God.

You see, you know the true gospel. You know the whole gospel. You're real about the depth and the tragedy of sin. But you're also real and you're certain about the depth of the glory of the triumph of grace and redemption.

And that's what the preacher is wanting us to see. This world is unfair and unjust. Good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. It always will be under the sun.

But, when you see the whole story, when you grasp the future reality, then, and only then, can you live in the present. Not just with endurance, but even also with joy, with real joy.

Not the shallow happiness of pretending away bitter realities of life. No. But rather the deep happiness of a contented spirit that's learned to live with all of these things, with all the manifest injustice of a human world and our society.

[8 : 22] And yet, you can still say, as Peter says, we rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory. Because we know that we are obtaining the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls.

but that joy only begins when we begin to face up to the manifest injustice of a sinful world. When we learn to live patiently with the tragedy of sin.

Excuse me. You'll have to put up with my frog in the throat today. Begins when we take that seriously. But there is more to it even than that, isn't there?

Than a true and real view of man's sin. There's another big issue that also can so often cause us resentment and anger as believers and which if we don't come to terms with, we will also be robbed of our joy and our contentment in life.

And it's the fact that behind all the mess of sin and injustice in this world, we also know there is God himself. and behind it all, we as Christians know that God is sovereign.

[9 : 36] And you see, that means that the truth is that when we are resentful and angry about the world and its injustices and its unfairnesses in life, behind all that reality is the fact that also at heart we're being angry and resentful of God himself, aren't we?

Because if he is sovereign, ultimately, he's in control. It's down to him. And that's very serious, isn't it? And so you see in chapter 8 verses 16 down to chapter 9 verse 10, the preacher directs his

spotlight exactly there to pinpoint the issue.

He homes in on something else that we've simply got to come to terms with. Not just the manifest injustice of a sinful world, but also the mysterious justice of a sovereign God.

God. We have to learn to live humbly with the transcendence of God. You see, real wisdom accepts not only are we not good, that's why the world is as it is, but we are not God either.

But therefore, accept the limitations of our creatureliness so that even for believers there are mysteries that are just way beyond us and there always will be. It won't ever be otherwise in our life under the sun.

[10 : 53] In short, you see, we've got to learn not only to live with the mess of man, we've got to learn to live with the mystery of God.

The verses 16 and 17 make that so plain, don't they? Do you see? The workings of God in our world are simply unfathomable. Men try day and night to understand them, says the preacher, but they can't.

Verse 17, man cannot find out. However much he seeks and toils in finding, he will not find it out, says the preacher. Even the wise, he said, those who fear God, those who are believers, who know God, they can't find it out, he says.

He's just debunking here, isn't he, the naivety and the nonsense of so much shallow and superficial Christianity. The kind of thinking that says, well, come to Jesus and everything will be fine, there will be no more problems, no more mysteries.

Well, that's just nonsense. It is a mystery, says the preacher, even for the wisest believers. Even a wise man claims to know, but he can't find it out.

[12 : 01] That's just what the New Testament tells us plainly, isn't it? Even now, though, we're filled with the Spirit of God, says Paul, we see as through a glass darkly. We know in part. And we must be content simply to accept that.

Because it's simply a recognition of the fundamental reality that God is God and we are not God. And therefore, we can't and we won't ever be able to control and understand fully the totality of life in this world.

Nor in our own life, nor in our own personal world. You see, it's the very essence of sin, though, isn't it? That we just won't recognize that. We won't submit to that.

We want control. We want knowledge. We want for us what belongs only to God. And that's the essence of sin, isn't it?

Remember Genesis 3? It was a reach for knowledge. The knowledge of God. But no, that's all wrong, you see. And the reality is utterly different.

[13 : 04] That's what chapter 9, verses 1 to 3 is saying, isn't it? It's all, he says, in the hands of a truly sovereign God. Even the very details of life, of the righteous and the wise.

The wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Even as Christians, therefore, we're not exempt from the mysteries of God's sovereign hand.

We just don't know what lies ahead of us. Whether it's love or hate from others, whether it's good fortune or bad. Look at verse 2. It's the same for all. The same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and evil, to the clean and unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not.

As is the good, so is the sinner. This is an evil. What's done under the sun, the same event happens to all. We all have mixed experiences in life because we're human beings, because we inhabit the same world with other human beings, with all its evil, with all its madness.

And we all, says verse 4 in the end, go to the grave. We can't deny that, can we? Anyone deny that? And the point is, you see, we just can't look at life and judge from what's happening to us whether God loves us or hates us either.

[14 : 21] Whether being rewarded or being punished. We just can't do that because the same event happens to all. His justice is mysterious. He moves in a mysterious way.

And it's often just utterly baffling to us, isn't it, in this world, because He is a sovereign God and we're just creatures. It's beyond us. And it always will be beyond us.

It's not that there's no meaning to life. It's not that life is just chaotic and random. Of course not. There is meaning and order and design. And God's hand is directing it all. He says, all our deeds are in the hand of God.

It's just that it's much, much bigger than us. It's beyond us. We'll never fathom ever the sovereign mysteries of God's justice.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, says the Lord. And friends, if you are not going to be hardened and embittered Christians, you've simply got to come to terms with this and learn to live humbly with the transcendence of God and to trust that God is just and not unjust, even though it is sometimes a real mystery to you.

[15:37] That's just what it means to trust God. That's what it means to have faith, to see the invisible, to live with the mysteries that we simply cannot fathom in this world.

But it's hard, isn't it? When we can't understand why God allows something to happen in our lives or in somebody else's life, we find it so hard. when we lose the job that we love, far worse, when we lose the loved one that we love, or we don't have the child that we long for, or we have to bear some handicap, some agonizing thing, or a hundred thousand other things that puzzle us, that grieve us to the very core of our beings.

things. But you see, real biblical faith isn't about controlling God and always understanding everything and therefore being able to manipulate God to do our bidding.

That's not faith. That's idolatry, in fact. Now, last, so much of what passes for Christianity today is just that, isn't it?

It's a consumerist idolatry. It's an escapist idea that somehow we can manipulate God to dance to our tune, to give us what we want in answer to our prayers, to give us the life that we want it to be, to act as an insurance policy beyond that, beyond death.

[17:07] You see, that's so utterly false and it's exposed, isn't it, by reality when we hit life's disappointments and tragedies that aren't explained, that aren't just sorted by trite religion.

And as we know, alas, it's exactly then, isn't it, that so many folk lose their faith. But you see, it never was real faith. It never was true biblical faith.

Because the heart of real faith is not an attempt to manipulate God's sovereignty and anger when we don't get what we want.

No, real faith is acceptance of God's sovereignty, submission to it, recognizing the mystery of God and living humbly with the transcendence of God, even amid the mess of our lives.

Real faith is living through all of that humbly and allowing our faces to shine, even when the darkest clouds of his mysterious providence seem to surround us.

[18:10] people who are living through the world. That is an attitude that can and does liberate us to live life to the full, even in this veil of tears under the sun.

You see verses 4 to 10? While you're alive, he says, there's hope. Knowing what being mortal really means is actually what liberates you to be most fully human.

We know that the grave awaits. And so we must seize the day while it's still today. That's always the Bible's message, isn't it? Today is the day for action. See verse 6 doesn't mean that there's nothing beyond the grave.

They have no more share in all that's done under the sun when they're dead. No, he's clearly talked already several times and will again about judgment and therefore the consequences of judgment beyond the grave.

Now what he means is just very simple. We only have one one life to live on earth. Death is the decisive end. There's no reincarnation, there's no second chances. He's just telling us what the New Testament tells us plainly.

[19:17] Hebrews 9.27 It's appointed for man to die once and then comes judgment. And the point is God gives us this mortal life, this one life, to live to the full under God.

To realize its potential for what it really is. Not, not to be struggling always trying to make it what it can't be and won't ever be. Can you see that when you come to terms with this mysterious justice of God's sovereignty, it is such a liberating thing.

It really is. First of all, it frees you from anger, doesn't it? See, if you won't come to terms with this transcendence of God, with the fact of his real sovereignty that you can't ever manipulate or control God so as to shape the world into the world you want it to be, then you'll waste your life seeking for that and you'll never, never find it because it just doesn't exist in this world.

You'll be looking for a level of control and authorship over your life that you just can't ever have because you're not God. If that's what you do, you'll become bitter and angry because it constantly disappoints you.

It eludes you. You'll be an angry person. You won't be a happy person. And in the process, you'll also miss out on all the wonderful things that do exist in this world and that can be rejoiced in and that should be found and rejoiced in, even in this veil of tears under the sun.

[20 : 54] But you see, if you accept the biblical reality, if you embrace real biblical faith, if you trust God as God, transcendent and above your control, above your understanding all the time, if you're content with what you are, a creature, not the creator, yes, a beloved redeemed human being, but still a human being, not a divine being, you accept that.

That's the beginning of liberation to rejoice and revel in all the joy that true created human beings have been created for in this world. world. You'll be freed from a life of anger, anger at the world and anger at God, from a perverse view of God, when you constantly think God must be against you or ignoring you or angry with you, just because you can't fathom out what's going on in your life all the time.

when you accept the real mystery of God and trust that his ways are and always will be higher than ours, always will be beyond our understanding, when you learn to live humbly with that and trust him, it really is a liberation.

liberation. We stop trying to work out why God has allowed this or that to happen all the time. Why that lovely Christian man who's lost his wife?

Why that wonderful work of God that seems to be so blessed is struggling and having such persecution and hardship? Or why this thorn in my flesh that I've wrestled with and prayed to God about hasn't been removed?

[22 : 33] See, the answer to that question almost always will simply be this. We don't know and we're never going to know under the sun because God hasn't told us and yet he asks us to trust him all the same.

We humble ourselves under his mighty hand. We live humbly with his transcendence because we know him and we love him and we trust him. Friends, that's the only way of living that will free you from a life of anger.

It's also the only way of living that will free you from a life of constant anxiety. It's just really believing and taking to heart. Deuteronomy 29 verse 29.

Don't look it up, just listen. The secret things belong to the Lord our God but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever that we might do all the words of this law. that's such a charter of liberation when you really grasp it. You know, it frees us from anxiety. It frees us always from seeking knowledge that's not ours to know.

[23 : 43] And therefore, it frees us for action to get on with throwing ourselves at living the life that God has given us to lead without paralyzing anxiety and fear about life.

Again, that's such a vital thing to grasp. So many Christians are paralyzed in life because they're waiting and waiting for God to reveal to them some special sense of guidance about what they should do.

They can't seem to take a step forward in making a career move or making a relationship move or anything. Because they have to know for sure somehow that this is God's will for my life.

In other words, they want a revelation of the future in advance. But that, friends, is simply failing to live humbly with the transcendence of God.

It's unwillingness to come to terms with mystery, with the fact that there are secret things that belong only to God and not to us. And the future that lies before us is one of those things.

[24 : 49] Verse 1 of our chapter, our deeds are in the hands of God and whether love or hate, good or ill, whatever it is, man does not know. Both are before him. You see, that puts a massive spoke, doesn't it, in that whole idea of that kind of guidance from God.

You can't know your future. God says so. Nor can you try to gauge by the events that are happening to you and around you whether God is showing you favor or punishment about the decisions you've made.

because verse 2 says the same event happens to all, to the obedient and to the disobedient. So you make a decision in life and some bad things start happening to you. You say, oh, I must have done the wrong thing.

I'm out of God's will. No, the same things happen to all, says the preacher. He's a hopeless course to live, seeking out those kind of insurances, always living with that kind of anxiety and that's why many Christians, especially many young Christians, tie themselves so much in knots with this whole

idea of guidance.

And the preacher says, don't do it. Stop trying to second guess the secret things of God. And rather, latch on to the things that God has revealed and just do them.

[26 : 05] Often if I'm discussing issues of guidance with folk, I take them to 1 Thessalonians. Don't look it up now, but read it later on. Do you want to know what God's will for your life is?

Well, I'm going to tell you right now from the Bible. 1 Thessalonians 4 verse 3. This is the will of God, says Paul, your sanctification, your holiness. In chapter 5 verse 16, rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. There's your answer. God wants your holiness and he wants your happiness. That's pretty liberating, don't you think? Pretty simple too.

Well, that's what the preacher is saying here. Submit yourselves to God's true sovereignty. It's truly liberating. It frees us from anger and resentment and anxiety and it frees us for action and it frees us for rejoicing.

See, when you grasp how great God's sovereignty really is and what it really means to be inescapably in his hand, it liberates you to seize the day while it is still today, while you're still alive.

[27 : 17] There's only one life for living that God has given us and then comes judgment, he says. So live that life before him. Live it with him. Live it with all your might.

Recognize the mystery of God, that he is truly sovereign over it all and therefore rejoice in the mandate of God, that he has set you truly free to live before him with joy.

He really does, you know. Look at these final verses, verses 7 to 10 as we draw to a close. It's the three R's for a life of holiness and happiness.

We're always being told we have to get back to the three R's, don't we? Never quite understand why spelling isn't in there. People think reading, writing and arithmetic begin with R. I'm not quite sure. But anyway, here's three R's.

This is the revelation of God for your life. This is the guidance that he gives to us. Not the secret things, the revealed things for us to do. First are, verse 7 and 8, find joy in the refreshment that God gives you in life.

[28 : 20] Now, go eat your bread in joy. Drink your wine with a merry heart for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.

Do you see? Total freedom from some perverse view that God is against us. To rejoice in God's good gifts. Freedom from the perversity of slaving miserably through life, working so hard for the future, so hard for the future that the present day actually passes us by and leaves us miserable and exhausted and angry with life all the time.

Now, stop, says the preacher. Stop. Go home and rejoice in the simple pleasure of meal. Have a lovely meal.

Have a glass of good wine. Don't feel guilty. God has already approved what you do. What a great verse for workaholics, don't you think? People who have no time for lunch and who sit at the desk with a sandwich pouring over the computer looking stressed, looking ill all the time, come home, turn the computer on, work until midnight.

Stop it, says the preacher. Put on your white garments, put on your happy clothes, take time to look good, wear those cosmetics, the oil on your hair. God has made us to enjoy refreshment in life while we're still alive because it's too late to enjoy that when you're in the grave.

[29 : 48] Remember that the preacher is writing to a society not at all unlike ours, the exiles returned from Babylon, and a society where coinage had become the big thing, where there had been an economic boom where land prices were rising, where people were trading and working away, slaving to make money to pay their mortgages.

So very similar to our world today. And he says to them, listen, there's only one life. The dead have no share, no more rewards of the blessings of life on earth.

Find joy in refreshment, in rest. Don't forget God is the God of rest. God is the God of Sabbath. He invented the concept. Find rest.

Find rest especially on the day of rest, on the Lord's Day. Don't ruin it by slogging yourself to death, by working for exams for ten hours. That's crazy. Give it all up.

Sit down. Rejoice and share a meal with your friends. That's what life is really about. Not exams, not things like that. Second R, verse 9, find joy in the relationships that God gives you now in this life.

[31 : 10] Enjoy life with the wife you love, because that is your portion, your reward. The relationships with other people are at the very heart, aren't they, of what's really important in life.

So says the preacher, and so says God, make time for them. Relish them. Find joy in them. Don't sacrifice them. The things that are of real value, real reward.

Don't sacrifice them for worthless things, passing things. Extraordinary how often we do that, isn't it? And we discover too late just how tragic it was.

Yes, of course, he's focusing here especially on marriage, which is the closest relationship of all, isn't it? And yes, we can fail to invest in that most precious of all relationships.

And maybe that is especially true of men. It is men that he's writing to here directly, although I'm sure it works both ways, doesn't it? But it applies, doesn't it, to all of our relationships, to family, to friends, to loved ones.

[32 : 15] These things are so precious. Yet so often we only realize that far too late when we've lost them. Do your kids come and say to you, come and do something with me, dad, come and do something with me, mum.

And you say, I'm too busy, I've got work to do, I'm doing my tax return, I'm doing this and that, I'm painting the bedroom, whatever it is. Well, forget that, says the preacher. Go and play hide and seek with your children today. Does your wife never get out, never get away from cooking and cleaning and ironing?

Well, says the preacher, forget the ironing. Learn to live with a dusty house for a while. Take your wife out for a lovely meal and enjoy a romantic dinner together. Rejoice in the relationships that God has given you in this life.

There's only one life to lead. Do your friends never see you because you're so busy? Maybe you're so busy being involved in church things. Well, there's the preacher.

Remember that verse about don't be over-righteous. Why kill yourself? Cut back. Invest. Find joy in your relationships with those you love. That's your reward in this life.

[33 : 23] That's what God reveals for you to do. Do it with a merry heart, he says, who's already approved of what you do. Third R, find joy, verse 10, in the responsibilities God gives you in this life.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might. Because you've only got this life to do it in. See, a real grasp of God's sovereignty never, ever, ever leads to fatalism and inaction.

Of course not. It's the exact opposite. We're liberated for action. To work urgently, says Jesus, for the night is coming when no man can work. We want to serve our master.

Well, it's still today, don't we? Don't be paralyzed by fear, by fearfulness. Don't wait for some kind of inner special assurance of guidance. Though that sort of thing was possible, it isn't.

Now, says the preacher, go and do it with all your might. Has God given you a place to serve him? At home or at work or maybe in full-time ministry, whatever it is?

[34 : 26] Well, grasp it with both hands. Has God opened a door? Has he given you a heart's desire to do something for him? Don't wait. Go, do it with all your might. He's already approved what you do.

See, the true sovereignty of God doesn't constrict you, it compels you to do it with all your might. All your deeds are in the hand of a sovereign God.

You don't need to worry, friends, that something you do can somehow mess up God's plans. Never. He is a sovereign God. He's a transcendent God.

And living humbly with that reality means that you don't waste time trying to search out his mysterious secret. That is a dead-end alley every time. Rather, you launch out in faith with him, trusting him all the way.

So, there we are. The secret things are for God alone. Recognize his mystery. But the things reveal they belong to us, that we may be truly liberated for joy in life.

[35 : 37] Recognize his mystery, and therefore rejoice in his mandate. Throw yourself into life. Find joy in the refreshments he gives us in this life to enjoy.

Find joy in the relationships he gives us in this life to enjoy before it's too late. Find joy in the responsibilities he's given us in this life before it's too late.

Be freed from anger and from anxiety, and be freed for action. That's the way to live this life with a joyful heart.

That's the way for the joyful heart to give you a shining face, a face that shines to those that you know and love, and to those who don't know you, to all round about, the light, the joy of the gospel

of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Live humbly with the transcendence of God. And friends, your face will shine for Jesus. Let's pray.
Amen. Rejoice always.