

2. The bafflement of life

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[0 : 00] I'll turn with you, if you would, to this strange and enigmatic book of Ecclesiastes. By the way, you're singing very well tonight. You've been singing very well the last few weeks.

It's lovely when I'm just praying before the sermon to listen and hear you all singing so well. I was at a wedding last weekend. It was a lovely wedding, a lovely Christian church.

But, you know, the music was so light I couldn't even hear myself singing. And I thought, perhaps they think the Lord our God is deaf in both ears. I certainly was by the end of it. But it's lovely to be able to hear your voices praising God.

And I'm sure the Lord finds that equally congenial. Anyway, be that as it may, we're going to look at Ecclesiastes. And tonight, we're thinking about the bafflement of life.

Now, there are many Christians who, I'm afraid, have a very superficial and simplistic and rather trite faith.

[1 : 06] And it's that kind of Christianity that can so easily give all Christians a bad name and leave us open to mockery.

Not for what we truly do believe, but because of something really quite different. It's just a caricature of the Christian faith. We were thinking about that this morning, really, with the kind of attitude that says, well, come to the Lord Jesus and everything will be wonderful.

It'll be all blessing and joy and laughter and success. And all sorrow and sighing will be just a thing of the past. All that dark side of life will melt away.

And everything will be wonderful. I think I'm going to call that now the Mazda sports car type of Christianity after that letter I was telling you about this morning.

You can have it all and have it now. If only you buy a new Mazda sports car. But that just isn't true, is it? I don't mean about the Mazda sports car, but I mean about the Christian life.

[2 : 12] At least it's not true in my experience. I love the Lord Jesus. I've known him for a long, long time. But the truth is that still very often my life is a cloud of confusion.

And at times it seems to be truly an exercise in futility. And that's quite apart from meetings of Glasgow Presbytery, I might add. Some of our elders were introduced to that for the first time quite recently.

And will understand what I mean. But although I've been following Christ for many years, I still find myself constantly baffled by some of life's enigmas.

And I suspect many of you are exactly the same. And I think it probably becomes more noticeable the longer you've been a Christian and the older you get. There are so many things in life that just baffle us.

We cannot understand them. The mystery of our lives here on earth, even our lives of faith. The mysteries are many and great. Well, friends, let me tell you that if that is how you feel, then the encouraging thing is that the Bible tells us that that is exactly what we are to expect of the life of faith.

[3 : 32] And that's certainly the preacher's message all the way through this book of Ecclesiastes. Life's journey is a joyful one. There is joy on life's journey for the believer.

We must not underplay that, and we won't. But nevertheless, the fact is that often it's a very vexed journey indeed.

And that's because life, by its very nature, is brief. It's mortal. We thought about that last Sunday evening. Life will be passing for every one of us, no matter how young and fit we feel, and how little we think about that at the moment.

And so all of us must learn to live with mortality that we simply cannot control. And unless we do, and until we do, then real joy in the Christian life is going to be something that will elude us.

Misery and frustration will stalk us all of our days until we come to terms with that simple fact. It's a paradox, isn't it, of the Christian faith, that in coming to terms with our finitude, we find the vital key to discovering lasting fruitfulness in our Christian lives.

[4 : 48] And that's a key theme of Ecclesiastes. But another key theme in this book is that not only is life brief for every human being, just because we are created beings and because we are not almighty God, life is also going to be very often baffling for all of us.

Life isn't just passing, but it's going to be perplexing for each one of us, says the preacher. And so we've also got to learn to live with mystery that we simply cannot comprehend. When I was first studying Ecclesiastes seriously some years ago, I wrote to my friend Ralph Davis.

Many of you will have read his books. They're in our bookshop, Dale Ralph Davis. And he's preached here on occasion. I value his advice greatly. And I wrote to him asking him what he thought.

Was I on the right lines in seeing this book of Ecclesiastes? Not as many commentators and many Christian preachers do see it, as primarily for the skeptic, for the secularist, but rather seeing it as primarily being for the believer, for the Christian person, to help us deal with the tensions and the mystery and the confusions that we often face in life.

So I wrote to Ralph and said, this is what I think. What do you think? And he wrote back very helpfully and agreed. And he said this, I couldn't agree more.

[6 : 17] God's people are both justified and baffled and must be content with that. I thought that summed it up really masterfully. Justified and baffled.

Well, that is exactly my experience as a Christian. And I suspect for many of you, it's just the same. Believing, trusting God, we know God, but often, all the same, we're baffled.

We're baffled by life's mysteries and enigmas. Despite everything that we know of Christ and his gospel, there's so much we just can't comprehend.

And that's why we need this book of Ecclesiastes and its message. Because the preacher is not a cynic. He's not a pessimist. He's not a secular pundit who gets it all wrong.

No, he is a pastor. He's a shepherd to lead God's people in life. That's what the word Ecclesiastes means. We said that last time.

[7 : 22] It's a Greek translation of the Hebrew word Kohelet, which simply means the one who gathers the kahal, the congregation of God's people. He's a true under-shepherd of God's flock.

And the words he speaks, as we read in chapter 12, they are the words of the one shepherd himself, God, our great shepherd. And so he is speaking truth, truth for life for God's people.

And these words that he teaches us are words to nurture us, to protect us, to lead us through the dark valleys of the shadow of death without fear, just as we read in Psalm 23.

His teaching, if we understand it, if we accept it humbly, his teaching will be like a rod and a staff for us, to comfort us even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

If we hear his words, if we walk his path with wisdom and with sanity, then we'll find that even in the presence of our great enemy, our own frail mortality, even in the midst of life's frightening mysteries, then he'll prepare a table of sustenance for us.

[8 : 38] He'll anoint our head with the oil of blessing. He will make our cup overflow with great joy. He will make goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives.

So yes, in the real Christian life, not in some fantasy that we might like to concoct, in the real Christian life, we may very well often be quite baffled, puzzled.

But if we believe and trust in our shepherd and in his words, we can and we will find a way of great blessing.

It's possible to be baffled and believing and blessed all at the same time. In fact, that is the genuine Christian life, according to the Bible.

There is a way to find venturesome joy, even along the vexed path, the vexed journey of our mortal lives.

[9 : 42] And that is the message of Ecclesiastes. And friends, that message is a great, great liberation. Finding this truth in the wisdom and in the ways of God, the true shepherd, that is the key to our lives here on earth.

It's what chapter 12, verse 13 sums up. It's the whole of mankind. It's the whole of what it means to be human, to find that pathway of wisdom.

It's what it means to reach our full earthly potential here in this mortal frame. In other words, this book is teaching us all the way through what it really means to be true human beings. To be truly fruitful and full in the lives that God gives to us as his gift for all of our days walking this earth.

And one of the things that we find hardest to learn and accept is that because God alone is God, all-seeing and all-knowing, and because we are not like that, we're not God, then life is not only ephemeral, it's not just mortal and passing, but very often it is one great enigma.

[10:58] It's perplexing. It's incomprehensible. And that's another of the shades of meaning of this word, vanity, hevel, that so dominates this book.

Life is vain. It's an enigma. It's a puzzle we just can't unravel. as Winston Churchill once said of the country of Russia.

It's a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. Well, that's what the writer here is saying about many aspects of our human life.

Look at chapter 1 in verse 15. What's crooked, he says, cannot be made straight. What's lacking cannot be counted. By us, at any rate, that's what he's saying because some mysteries are just too great and they're beyond us.

I don't just mean the kind of mysteries that we face in everyday life. You know, why when you drop your toast it's always a butter side down. Have you noticed that? Always is, isn't it? On the carpet.

[12:05] Or the kind of mysteries that, you know, whenever you just light up the barbecue immediately it starts to rain. Life's full of all these kind of rather trivial mysteries. We've just bought a whole lot of salt and snow movers for the church so we're now about to have at least five years when the temperature never gets below zero.

Those sort of puzzles seem to happen all the time in life. But I don't mean those things. I mean the real puzzles and mysteries. The things that vex us.

The things that distress us. The things that so often fill our lives with great pain. Why can everyone else seem to have children and we can't when we're so desperate to have them?

Why has cancer struck so many times in my immediate family and not in the families of all the other friends that I know?

Why do some people seem to suffer so much in life and yet they're the loveliest most gracious beautiful people that you could know and yet some of the real rotters in life they seem to just go from strength to strength success to success.

[13:24] Why? It's a great human question isn't it? And there are a thousand other painful mysterious distressing baffling questions that you've asked and that I've asked in the quietness of our own homes and the quietness of our own prayers to God.

Isn't that so? Well, says the writer, the teacher, the Kohelet, for us on earth that question why is an inevitable question.

just as we are mortal and therefore transient on this earth so also there's a realm above this whole earth that we are totally ignorant of that it's impossible for us to fully understand.

Look again at chapter 5 and verse 2 it's such a vital verse here in the book of Ecclesiastes. Be not rash with your mouth not let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God for God is in heaven and you are on earth so let your words be few.

Never forget that says the preacher that is what explains the fact that there are so many things that we cannot explain and we will never be able to explain.

[14:53] God is infinite God is transcendent but you and I we are transient we are but a puff of wind by comparison we are hevel vanity gone so no wonder life is perplexing and puzzling at so many times there's another key phrase through Ecclesiastes that serves to remind us of that all over again and again look at chapter 1 you'll see it there several times just in the first few verses this little phrase under the sun verse 3 what is a man gained by all the toil at which he toils under the sun verse 9 there's nothing new under the sun verse 14 again I've seen everything that's done under the sun behold it's vanity a striving after wind now again that's not just a wrong view of the of the secularist who doesn't believe in

God above although it is true of him it applies to him as well but if you look at verse 13 there in chapter 1 you'll see the preacher uses a very similar phrase a variant of the phrase to show that it applies equally to believers all that is done he says verse 13 under heaven is an unhappy business so you see he's saying that even from the standpoint of faith even for those who believe in God the

God of heaven we must recognize that there will still be great mysteries in life just because we are not God and God is God so there'll always be more to life than we can compute no matter how hard we strive for wisdom the preacher himself found that look at verse 16 he got more wisdom than anybody else ever before him great knowledge and yet verse 17 he still couldn't unravel life's enigmas it was just a chasing after the wind he says to think that he could in fact look at verse 18 the more wisdom he says the more vexation the more knowledge the more sorrow well I reckon there's a few folk here who are writing up their PhDs who would say a hearty amen to that more and more wisdom more and more sorrow reminds me of what Don Carson said about

PhDs the danger is he says you get to know more and more about less and less until soon you know absolutely everything about absolutely nothing thought that was rather good well human wisdom seeking to understand the really important things in life the why questions the questions we can't stop asking ourselves human wisdom will always ultimately come up against the brick wall a wall of despair because life is baffling we're inside a finite mortal world that can only be explained by an infinite and immortal God and God himself says my ways are far far higher than your ways Isaiah 55 as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts says the Lord and that means friends even for Christians even for taught

Christians mature Christians godly Christians even for those to whom God has revealed his marvelous plans and purpose from time and eternity as he has to us in his word even for us our knowledge will always be limited good to seek wisdom especially God's wisdom of course it is but an essential part of real wisdom is to accept that we simply don't have and will never have the capacity to know all the things that God knows there will always be riddles wrapped in mysteries inside enigmas as far as this life is concerned and part of obedient faith is coming to terms with that coming to terms with the fact that we are not God and that therefore contentment about living with mystery is the essential step to joy and peace in our lives and we don't like that we want to be in on everything we don't like the fact that there are things that we couldn't understand or aspire to there's nothing makes your ears twitch so much is there as two people murmuring just quietly just out of ear shot you're desperate to hear we speak about kids with their ears flapping grown up speaking about something in a lowered voice they desperately want to hear that's the way we are we want to know that we can know it all but friends the Bible says no there are things that are not for us to know because God is running the world not us and he's decided that there are things that we don't need to know and we need to trust him to run the world his way telling us what we need to know and being content not to know the things he keeps from us there are secret things said Moses in Deuteronomy 29 verse 29 they belong to the

Lord our God not for us for us are the things he has revealed that we might get on and do his will what he's told us and what he's commanded us we're not to treat God therefore like people treat a football manager after a game on Saturday have you ever listened to Radio Clyde or Radio Scotland after the results are in on a Saturday afternoon every Tom Dick and Harry in the country is phoning up giving his view about why the manager should have played so and so in the left back position and not the right back or why so and so should have been substituted or whatever else it is quite extraordinary the wealth of knowledge there is in the west of Scotland isn't there about what the manager ought to have done but that's not how we're to treat God the path to joy is to let God be the manager and to accept our limitations in our wisdom and in our understanding and to learn to live with mystery that we can't comprehend even though those mysteries may constantly baffle us and trouble us and there are plenty of those friends in our lives let's look at a few of them mentioned here in Ecclesiastes look at chapter 7 verse 19 wisdom gives strength to the wise man he says more than ten rulers who are in a city wisdom is a very very great thing but just look back a few lines to verse 15 in my vain life

[22 : 30] I've seen everything there's a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness there's a wicked man a foolish man who prolongs his life by evil doing be not overly righteous and do not make yourself too wise why should you destroy yourself you see the righteous person the wise person often perishes prematurely whereas the wicked fool he prolongs his life in evil doing isn't that baffling so you have Ronnie Biggs the great train robber off living it up to a long happy old age down there in South America while the victims of his crime look on and live a miserable life in this country or to take a more recent example there we have Megrahi the bomber of the Pan Am flight taken off to Libya to die and there he is still so long afterwards causing such embarrassment to our government now there's so many things in life aren't there that just seem so wrong so baffling you

have lunatic drivers charging down the M77 at 100 miles an hour and yet you're the one who gets stopped for doing 55 it's baffling isn't it or worse somebody jumps the lights and is driving erratically smashes their car into the side of your car and you're the totally innocent one and yet the upshot of the whole thing is you're the one who gets charged and you're the one who gets points on your license that happened to somebody

I know just recently or far far worse than these trivial things think of the scandal of countless Nazi war criminals who fled Germany after the war having murdered thousands some of them tens of thousands and living to happy and prosperous old age in Chile and some of the other countries in South America America that's what happens in this world of ours under the sun isn't it and it's baffling to us even as Christians we say to ourselves how can God allow such a thing look at chapter 8 verse 17 and 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 we just can't fathom the ways of

God look at chapter 9 at verse 13 I've also seen this example of wisdom under the sun and it seemed great to me there was a little city with a few men in it and a great king came against it and besieged it building great siege works against it but there was found in it a poor wise man and he by his wisdom delivered the city he had no one remembered that poor man but I say that wisdom is better than might though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard how often those of true wisdom and true contribution to the life of our society and our world are just passed by totally unnoticed and yet celebrities vacuous personalities or vacuous non personalities get themselves plastered all over the front page of the tabloid all the time and you get more votes for people on the X factor than you even get voting in a general election that astonishing maybe that's related to chapter 10 and verse 6 folly is set in many high places as it were an error proceeding from the ruler folly is set in many high places and the rich sit in low places

I've seen slaves exalted on horses and princes walking on the ground like slaves well again some of the ablest and finest people are never heard of and yet it does seem doesn't it so often that folly dominates the high places the place of high society the places high up in politics and in all the things that matter in this world and we could go on and on ecclesiastes throws up many of these examples of the enigmas the puzzles of our world that seem so wrong by any sane measure of morality that even with the insight of faith even with God's revelation to us we still find these things inexplicable at times incomprehensible and in a way perplexity is often so much greater for the Christian just because we know God can do all things and we find it so hard when he doesn't do what we think he ought to do isn't that right when he doesn't heal our loved one of cancer when he doesn't seem to be helping immediately the

Christian brothers and sisters in a certain place facing dire persecution because of the cause of Christ or when he doesn't seem to honor my efforts at evangelism and all the things that I'm trying to do to make the gospel known or a hundred other things where we find ourselves saying why why Lord isn't that one of the commonest questions in your prayers why well says the preacher the answer the ultimate answer is simply this because God is transcendent and he alone is above the sun but we we are hevel we are transient we are but a breath we are time bind and we are earth bind and we can't know it all and we will never be able to compute it all he is in heaven and we are on earth and we need to learn then to muzzle our mouths and our accusing questions we need our words to be few we are to be in awe of God who alone sees all things and knows all things and understands all things and is the

[29 : 21] God who does all things well and will be shown to be the God in the end whose ways have always been perfect and just and right and true and wonderful so important so important for us to be able to be humble like that even in solid Christian belief we've got to recognize that there is bafflement we don't have and we never will have all the answers not under the sun not in this mortal passing existence and when we don't understand friends which is let's be honest which is very often it's better that we do hold our tongues let our words be few let not our mouths or our hearts lead us into sin it's so easy isn't it to be trite to be superficial and therefore sometimes to be deeply wounding to a suffering person just as Job's comforters were they weren't comforters they were tormentors if only they'd shut up if only they'd just sat with Job and cried with him what a difference that book would be it's easy to do though isn't it we do it we all do it we're thinking about that this morning in the misuse of Romans 8 and 28 when some tragedy happens in somebody's life and we say oh something good will come of this you'll see all things work together for good to them that

love

God please don't say that to me when I'm facing a tragedy in my life don't say that to me just hold your tongue and squeeze my hand or something because it's just not true is it it's not true not like that anyway nothing good may ever seem to come to it to our eyes in this mortal life it may be mystery bafflement enigma pain perplexity agony right till our last breath don't say that kind of thing to a suffering saint listen to the preacher hold your tongue for in much wisdom is much vexation and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow it's easy for us to be insensitive to increase vexation to increase sorrow but no one writer sums up the whole message of ecclesiastes this way he says it's a crashing destruction of idols and easy answers to the questions of life's meaning including religious answers that signs through this book because God is in heaven and we are on earth because we are transient only God is transcendent it can never be other so how then do we live what's the answer to chapter 1 verse 18 that more knowledge just leads us to more vexation if we think that we can grasp all the answers for everything well two simple things says the preacher first be humble remember

God is in heaven and that you are on earth accept your limitations let God be God and let your words be few remember you're a creature chapter 7 verse 14 says in the day of prosperity be joyful and in the day of adversity consider God has made the one as well as the other be humble accept that though you don't know what God is doing God does know what he's doing and trust him that's what Romans 8 is really about we saw that this morning trust him in the midst of the mystery and the hardship and the toil he gave up his own son for us how will he not ultimately therefore give us all things he will you can trust him in that humble trust in God he's beyond us he is but he is the good shepherd not an evil one so be humble and secondly says the preacher see the good see the good that is there to be recognized in life don't let the enigmas of life and the bafflement of life dejoy your life on this earth it's so easy for us to do that but that's not how God wants us to live the way of humble trust the way of letting

God be God is the way to joy on life's journey look at chapter 5 once again as we close towards the end again it's just like chapter 2 in verse 24 that we read last week gives us a choice there are two ways really and only two ways to live there's a way of refusing to live under the sun gladly the way of trying to be God trying to control everything yourself that's chapter 5 verses 16 and 17 toiling for the wind unable to accept your own mortality but as verse 15 says you will leave life naked just as you came into life resenting that trying to hold on to things trying to make more of it than it ever is this says verse 16 is a grievous evil just as he came so shall he go and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind moreover all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger try to be God and control life as though you were God and that is the way that life will lead you or there's the way to live that lets

God be God and lives with thanks for the things that God does put in our path here in this life even amid the many questions and the mysteries and the bafflement and the puzzles it sees the good verse 18 I've seen what is good and fitting or beautiful to eat and drink and find enjoyment literally to see the good in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given to him for this is his lot his reward literally everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil this is the gift of God Paul tells us when he's writing to Timothy that God wants us to receive all his good gifts in the midst of our baffling lives and to receive them with thanksgiving with joy it's the teaching of demons he says to prevent

[36 : 50] Christians from seeing the good seeing the joy in the midst of life's puzzle miracles God wants us he says to receive his many good gifts with thanksgiving with joy he richly provides us with all things to enjoy says Paul and the true way of joy is what the writer is speaking about here accepting our lot not letting the bafflement about God's ways obscure our joy in the bounty of God's ways Godliness with contentment is great gain says Paul that's what the writer is saying here in verse 19 everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil this is the gift of God we'll all live this life baffled but you can be baffled and bitter because we're not God and we can't explain it all and we're trying to and trying to grab hold of things that are always going to be beyond us that's the way of verse 17 vexation and sickness and anger you can be a Christian and have your life delighted by so much vexation and sickness and anger or you can be baffled equally and yet believing and trusting him who is the true shepherd and is leading you in the path of joy in the midst of it all and that's verse 20

he will not remember much the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with the joy of his heart two ways to live well there's only really one way to live isn't there let's just end by listening again to the psalmist speaking about life lived joyfully with that one shepherd just listen

I'm baffled but even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for your rod and staff they comfort me you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies you anoint my head with oil my cup overflows surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the lord forever believing baffled yes but blessed blessed with great joy and life vexed journey let's pray lord help us we pray to be humble to let you be God and to trust you and therefore to see the good in all that you bring to our lives in this baffling world and may we be kept thus occupied with joy in our hearts from you all the days of our lives for we ask it in Jesus name amen how to stay there a side me oh as we go to the operated again the base for you it when home it too the what