

3. The bitterness of life

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, let's turn together, shall we, to the book of Ecclesiastes. And we're going to look at parts of this book again.
- I wonder if you were actually able to sing verse 3 of that hymn with any sense of feeling or real enthusiasm. Let me just read it to you again.
- I thank you more that all our joy is touched with pain. That shadows fall on brightest hours. That thorns remain.
- So that earth's joys may be our guide and not our chain. We thank God often for the thorns that remain in life.
- The thorns in your own life. The things that even in the midst of the joys of life, the happy days of brightness, the things that remind you painfully that this is a fallen world and that life is not as it should be.
- [1 : 0 9] Do you thank God for those thorns? I'm not sure I do very often. In fact, I know I don't. In fact, I'm not sure I ever do.
- Even Paul the Apostle didn't thank God for his thorn, did he? Not for a long, long time. He pleaded with God to take that thorn away.
- A messenger of Satan, he called it. It took a long, long time, even for the great Apostle Paul, to understand, at last, what that hymn writer is saying.
- That even the pain that we know and that we experience in life can be a means of grace in the hands of God to point our eyes to our true Christian hope.
- To the true glory that God has called us for and put a longing for in our hearts. The glory of our Lord Jesus Christ that is still to come, that we have still yet to see revealed in this world.
- [2 : 1 9] Thorns is a messenger of grace to point us to that so that we never lower our expectations merely to the joys that this world can afford.
- This vain life, this life of Hevel, of vanity, of enigmas. This life under the sun that the teacher is speaking about.
- Ephemeral and passing as it is. The hymn writer sees that these thorns will never allow us to think that this, even at its best, is ever as good as it gets.
- As verse 4 of the hymn says, we have enough, enough joy that is, yet not too much to long for more. Well friends, as I said, that hymn in many ways sums up the message of Koheleth, or the ancient preacher of Ecclesiastes.
- It explains exactly the strange mix of grim realism and yet clear hope that he has. Of candid acceptance of the harsh realities of life, and yet the clear affirmation that there is joy to be known all through life's vexed journey for the people of faith, for the people who will heed the wise words of the one shepherd and understand them as he faithfully passes them on to us.

[3 : 49] When we really grasp the truth that God has kept the very best in store for the age to come, when everything at last will be brought to final judgment and final renewal, when we really grasp that fact, which is the Christian hope, then, and only then, will we be able to live both with joy so that we can sing, I have enough, and yet also with real hope.

I have not too much to long for more. A yearning for deeper peace not known before. So when we see that and grasp that, both of these things, that we will be able to do what the teacher keeps saying to us.

It's what God wants us to do in this life. Eat and drink and find joy in our toil. And to see these things, these simple things, as a blessing and as a great gift of God himself for this mortal life of ours here on earth.

Even though we recognize that life is brief and that it's passing for all of us, seeing this perspective is what enables us to live joyfully even with mortality that we know we cannot control.

And even though we know that life is baffling, that it's perplexing, always for all of us, yet we can live joyfully even in the midst of mysteries that we perhaps can never comprehend this side of eternity.

[5 : 33] And furthermore, and this is what I want to think about tonight, it's another strong theme that this book of Ecclesiastes forces us to come to terms with. Also, we are enabled to live with joy even in the midst of life's bitterness.

Because the preacher tells us that life will be painful for many of us. Painful, I guess, for all of us, sometimes, but for some of us, for some of us, at some times, and for some, even perhaps most of the time, life will be painful.

And yet we can live joyfully even though we must often live with these miseries that we in our lives can't ever curtail.

You see, the world, the world is not just as it is because God is the creator and we are creatures because he's infinite. And we're passing. That's true, and we've seen that.

And so inevitably, there are things that we will never be able to understand or compute. But our lives are not just subject to finitude because we're not infinite like God is.

[6 : 56] Our whole world is subject to futility and to frustration, to vanity, to enigmas, to hevel, because of the curse of sin.

And the natural world, you see, as we call it round about us, the natural world isn't natural. It's not the way it was created. It's not as it ought to be. And our human world is far, far from the way it ought to be and was meant to be because we, as a race, we've rebelled against our maker, against our God.

And the result, of course, is that we've drastically and disastrously damaged, not only ourselves, but our whole world, our whole environment. Last Sunday morning, we were reading in Romans chapter 8 exactly that, that God has subjected the whole creation to futility.

This very word, the same word, lifted out of Ecclesiastes. And that's why it's a confused world, a corrupt world, and a confusing world that we live in.

And that's why our lives are brief and baffling. And it's also why, alas, too often, our lives can be very bitter.

[8 : 17] And even Christian believers, here's the thing, friends, that we really have to understand, even faithful, obedient followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, we share in the vexation of a life where thorns remain.

And where thorns will remain until the very, very last day, not only of our lives, but of this present age.

Look at chapter 7 of Ecclesiastes, verse 29. Sums it all up, really, in one verse.

Chapter 7, verse 29. This alone I find, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes. And at one verse, really, that's a perfect summary of everything that the Bible teaches about sin, the sin of humanity.

That's why, even the very good and best things that human beings come up with, end up being flawed and wrong and very often lead to the very opposite because man has a heart that's full of schemes.

[9 : 36] That's what keeps accountants and lawyers in a job, isn't it? If you think about it. Not the only thing, but it's one of the many things. The government passes a new regulation about tax.

Within ten minutes flat, the accountants are on to finding a loophole. They've got a scheme to get around it. It's the same in commercial and the business world. Commercial lawyers.

Their whole livelihood so often is there, opening and closing loopholes of schemes that people have put into effect to try and get around something.

And you know that. So do I. It's the nature of our hearts, isn't it? Look at chapter 8, verse 11. The heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.

Now, often people disbelieve that sort of thing and say, well, if only you could get rid of the malevolent influence of society and so on, on people, they would naturally well up with all the goodness in their heart and everything would be lovely and rosy.

[10 : 48] Well, if you really believe that, just try having a game of football without a referee and see what happens. I suppose the Rangers fans might feel that it would have been better for them this afternoon if they hadn't had a referee.

But just try. Can you imagine having any competitive game of football without a referee? Of course you can't because the heart of the children of man is not set to always play by the rules and do righteous.

It's fully set to do evil. Look at chapter 9, verse 3. The hearts of the children of man are full of evil and madness is in their hearts while they live.

And after that, they go to the dead. It's pretty bleak, isn't it? Notice, by the way, that he's not saying here that evil is a form of madness.

That's not what he's saying, but he's saying that madness, the madness that's manifested in the behaviour of human beings is a manifestation of evil. It's a manifestation of the irrationality, the absurdity of sin.

[11 : 56] Sin at its root suppresses reality. That's what Paul says in Romans 1. We suppress the truth. And in its place, we put that which is futile and false.

A good example of this I read just recently. And it was somebody commenting on an article in the Scottish Daily Record just a little while ago. And it was a woman who was writing in to the newspaper.

And she was very worried because her 16-year-old daughter had become a Christian. And she was looking for advice. And here's what she said, quote, She goes to church every week and she's started dressing very modestly.

And she's been moaning at us when we do anything immoral. I don't want my daughter turning into a mad Christian, she said. And here's the comment from the writer.

Scotland today. Her mother's very worried and asks for advice because her teenage daughter won't dress like a slut or swear like a trooper. A mad Christian.

[13 : 10] So who's really mad? I want to ask. The hearts of the children of man are full of evil and madness is in their hearts where they live.

And that's why our world is as it is. That's why our lives experience the things that they do. And as believers, as Christians, friends, we have got to be supremely realists, not fantasists.

We've got to learn to live in a life where there are miseries and madnesses that we can't curtail. Now that is not to say, of course, that as Christians we're not to work to alleviate miseries and do things to help alleviate problems that we can curtail.

Of course not. Don't mishear me. The flip side of the great command to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength is that we are to love our neighbours as ourselves. And the whole Bible, of course, puts that responsibility on all of us.

Galatians 6 verse 10 is very explicit, isn't it? So then, whenever we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

[14 : 30] And so Christians are, of course, to engage with society and with public life. It's not the chief job of the church as the church, as an institution, as an organisation, but it most certainly is the role of all Christians because we believers are the church as an organism.

We are the organic church. I recommend to you what I wrote about that, quoting a very helpful article from Campbell Campbell Jack in our recent Tron Times magazine.

It just helps us to get that distinction between what is the job of the church as an institution and what is the job of the organic church, which is all of us as Christian people, with a duty to love our neighbours as ourselves and to do good wherever we have opportunity.

Not only to the household of faith, but especially there. So I'm not saying at all that we as Christians, because we see the world as it is and it's full of things that are miserable that we can't help, I'm not saying at all that we are not to do anything about those miseries.

In fact, it's because we do love our neighbours that we must engage with society. And we ought to be actively engaged in public life to protect our neighbours from that which is destructive to them.

[15 : 54] For example, today we should be as Christians, wherever we have the opportunity, we should be in our society fighting to support marriage. One of the greatest destructive forces at work in our nation today is the crusade.

And it is a crusade by secular zealots to undermine and to destroy the whole institution of marriage. It's coming right back to the fore again at this very present time.

It's a multi-pronged attack by liberal leftists and secularists and homosexual rights activists and others. Most of them, let's note, very, very small minorities in our society but highly organised, highly effective, vastly over-represented in the media.

and their whole crusade is to condition people, our neighbours, our friends and relatives, our fellow citizens, to condition their minds to believe that what they are arguing is right and is reasonable and normal.

That it's progressive to use that word that they love so much. marriage. When in fact, in fact, all the evidence points in the very opposite direction to the disastrous and destructive effect on the culture of a society that has turned its back on marriage as the bedrock of family life and of community life.

[17 : 25] I've said before that I think the last government seemed to be the very worst in the whole of our history in terms of undermining these things but I have to now say that the present government looks as though it's heading to become even worse.

Lynn Featherstone, the equalities minister, right now, it seems, is determined to try and do away with marriage altogether in terms of its distinctiveness as a lifelong union between man and woman.

Interesting, Ian Duncan Smith, the government minister, is a lone voice, it seems, now, calling for the government to make good on its pre-election pledge to support marriage in meaningful ways.

And as Christians, friends, we are not to be escapists, we are not to bury our heads in the sand, we are not to turn ourselves inwards and hide away from all cultural and social and political activities.

Of course we're not. We are the people who know that Jesus Christ is Lord over every society and every section of society on earth. And therefore it's incumbent upon us to do all we can to persuade, to show the health, to show the goodness of the ways of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[18 : 48] And of course Christians throughout history have done precisely that. they've been in the vanguard of crusading against so much of the misery in our world.

Think of Wilberforce and the Clapham sect. Think of the great social reformers and the penal reformers. Think of those who pioneered the hospice movement and so many other things.

So don't mishear me. Clearly I'm not saying for one minute that Christians shouldn't be engaged in society. I think we should be engaged in the arguments of society much more than we are.

And I'd love to see many more Christians, biblical Christians with a Christian world view taking the responsibility in public life, getting into the council, running for parliament and arguing for truth and righteousness which exalts a nation.

But having said all of that, what the teacher of Ecclesiastes is saying to us is that we are never never to be fantasists as Christians.

[20 : 03] And we are never to think that everything that's crooked can in the end be made straight by us, by our human wisdom or strength. However Herculean our efforts may be, however well-intentioned, however faithful and determined we might be, whether it's in the world, the world stage, whether it's in society at large, for that matter whether it's in our own personal lives.

There are crooked things that just will never be made straight this side of eternity. And any such thought that human beings can in their own power set the world to right is just utter vanity.

It's contrary to everything that the whole Bible teaches. It's a chasing after the wind. And that's just not Ecclesiastes, right? That's the message of the whole New Testament.

And so, the writer here, the teacher, is saying to us be realist believers, not fantasists. Don't be naive. Don't be shocked. This is a fallen world.

It is not going to be cured by humanity, not ever. And as Christians, friends, we should be the least shockable people on earth, shouldn't we? I often find it terribly ironic.

[21 : 23] Sometimes I speak to people and they find out that you're a minister, a clergyman, and they say, oh well, better not talk about that sort of thing in front of him. He might be shocked. Let me tell you, anybody who's been in Christian ministry for any amount of time at all can never be shocked about anything.

We've seen it all. And we've heard it all. And that's just inside the church, never mind outside the church. And as Christians, we need to be real about life's bitter realities.

We mustn't be rocked by them. Look at chapter 3, verse 16. Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness.

And in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. So should we as Christians be shocked? Should we be horrified when we discover that there's wickedness, that there's corruption right at the very heart of the criminal justice system, for example?

When we find that there are lawyers who are crooked people or judges even who are crooked people, should we be shocked by that? Well, of course not. We are shocked by that, weren't we?

[22 : 41] But we shouldn't be. Should we be horrified and rocked in our faith in the whole system of government when we find that parliamentarians are greedy and they're liars?

And they're liars. And they fiddle their expenses and they get elected by foul means as well as fair. I'm not just talking, by the way, about Libya and places like that.

When we've got MPs now who've gone to jail and even peers of the realm who are going to go to jail, should we be shocked by that? Well, not as Christians, of course not.

Because we know the truth about the human heart. When in the place of righteousness, in the courts of the church, among the clerics of the church, we find that there's wickedness, that there's personal immorality.

Should we be shocked? Well, not shocked. Saddened, of course. But not surprised. Because we know that this is a fallen world.

[23 : 56] We know that it's full of the entail of sin and of corruption. The hearts of the children of man are full of evil.

God made man upright. But they've sought out many schemes. And the result is a world in which there are and there always will be many miseries and much bitterness.

And whether we're talking about governments and nations or even churches or Christians, we will never, ever be able to fully curtail and transform these bitternesses and these miseries.

That's just the message of the whole of Scripture. Genesis 1 and 2, as you know, they open up telling us that God made a good world. He made a perfectly ordered world.

He made a beautiful world. Both physically and morally. And many of those echoes remain, of course, and they infuse our world. That's why we can learn much wisdom from studying the physical nature of this world and the sciences and so on.

[25 : 11] We can also learn a great deal in moral terms because God's moral substructure for the universe also still holds true in very, very many ways. And it's simply true.

As the Bible tells us that when people and nations live in line with the moral substructure of God's universe, they do, in general terms, by and large, live well.

Righteousness exalts the nation, says Proverbs 14. And sin is a reproach to any people. And we can see that. We're even seeing it today, aren't we?

In the unravelling of corrupt regimes in parts of the world. In the end, rottenness and corruption does not build a healthy society. It comes to ruin. As Genesis 3 tells us, there's been a huge earthquake in the whole world order.

Not just naturally, but also morally and spiritually because of man's rebellion. And that means that even human wisdom at its very best, even the wisdom that comes from God himself, still leaves us facing pain and perplexity.

[26 : 26] Even among his own people. That's what the New Testament affirms, isn't it? We were reading that just last week in Romans chapter 8. The great chapter about the Holy Spirit.

And yet, what are the marks of the Christian believer who is filled with the Holy Spirit? What are the telltale marks of being a child of God filled with his Spirit? We groan.

We're waiting for resurrection. Just as the whole world, the whole creation is groaning, waiting for its release. We groan as Christians. We say, why, Lord?

How long, Lord? It's so unfair, Lord. Yes, it is. Says the Bible. Still, in this world under the sun, this world marked by vanity, by the futility of sin, there is bitterness.

Even in the best of life, because of the taint, the shadow of the tragedy of sin. And yet, the writer tells us, don't miss this.

[27 : 31] This is not a cause for despair. It's a cause for hope. The futility of this bitter world is not out of control totally.

It's not out of all control just because it's out of our control. No, indeed, it's God himself, said Paul in Romans 8, who has subjected this world to futility in hope.

It's subjected to its current bitterness in sin with hope of release from that. So, yes, life is unfair.

It is bitter. It's painful. Sometimes, it seems unbearably painful to us. But there is hope. And what Paul speaks of in Romans 8 is exactly what the Ecclesiastes writer is telling us here in this book of his.

Look at chapter 3 verses 16 and 17 again very carefully. There is now, he says, in front of us very clearly injustice and wickedness.

[28 : 38] But, look at verse 17 of chapter 3. God will judge the righteous and the wicked.

There's a time for every matter and every work, he says, not yet, but it will come. Turn to chapter 8 again, to that passage that we read, puzzling as it may have seemed.

And look at 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. Because judgment doesn't come immediately, people just do evil and they think there'll be no comeback from it.

They do it a hundred times and think they'll live to a ripe old age and never get caught. I'm sure that's what the Prime Minister of Italy thinks, isn't it? But he's wrong.

Look at verses 12 and 13. There is a time of just judgment coming. Even for those whose money can buy them out of justice now.

[29 : 44] There's a time, says the writer, when it shall be well with those who fear God. Why? Because they fear him.

Because they honour him. Not because they're perfect. Because they fear and honour and buy the knee to God. But it will not be well, he says, in verse 13, for the wicked.

Again, who are they? Those who scorn God. Those who don't revere him and don't receive him. not just for their moral uprightness or downrightness.

In fact, the whole book of Ecclesiastes ends with exactly that word of certainty and hope. Just turn again to the very last couple of verses. Chapter 12, verse 13. The end of the matter.

All has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man. This is the whole of man. What it means to be human.

[30 : 43] For God will bring every deed to judgment with every secret thing whether good or evil. Isn't that last verse there the only hope?

The only hope for every person whose life has been really blighted by bitterness because of justice being denied them in this world? Having been scarred by wickedness that has never yet been punished?

Do you think what it must be like to live with a son or a daughter or a brother or a sister or a father and mother murdered brutally sexually abused perhaps horrendously treated and know all the rest of your days that that crime has never ever been brought to justice?

That somebody is walking with a smile on their face and money in their pocket and absolute freedom. Can you imagine the bitterness of living with something like that?

And a thousand other equally painful distressing things. But God will bring every deed to judgment with every secret thing whether good or bad.

- [32 : 00] God will bring to God to God and God will bring to God to God and God will bring to God and God so often we say that.
- And it's not wrong that we say that. It's true. It's not fair. Not yet. But a time is coming says the Bible when it will be forever.
- On that day as the New Testament confirms when the Lord Jesus himself comes to reign in glory and to share his glory with all who have longed for his appearing because they have faithfully followed him.
- That's just the New Testament language for what the Ecclesiastes writer here calls fearing God. Let me read to you the words of our Lord Jesus Christ himself. Just listen.
- Matthew chapter 25 chapter 25 chapter 26 chapter 25 chapter 25 chapter 26 those sheep and those goats might be.
- [33 : 28] Listen to Jesus' words again from Matthew chapter 19 at verse 28. Jesus said to his disciples, Truly I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.
- And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my name's sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.
- Friends, without that, there are times when the bitterness of this life would crush us. And that's the truth.
- Crush us and destroy us and leave us without hope. But with that hope, which is sure and certain, then it will be well for all who trust God, even as it will not be well for all who scorn him and mock him and multiply evil.
- And with that certain hope, we can live even with the misery in this world that we know if we're honest, we can never ever curtail.
- [34 : 56] And we can live with it in the midst and still have joy in our hearts and in our daily lives. Look again as we close to chapter 8 of Ecclesiastes in verse 14 and 15.
- When we know that certain end, we can live looking at all the bitter reality of life in the face. Verse 14 is bitter.
- There's vanity. There are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked and there are wicked to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous.
- That's true, isn't it? There are wicked people whose lives seem to be charmed in every possible way and there are the finest people in the world whose lives seem to be cursed and blighted and full of the deepest bitterness.
- How do you explain that? It's baffling. It's more than baffling. It's bitter. But because we know that the Lord Jesus is coming and that he will judge every secret thing and we can still live with joy in our hearts even in this bitter world.
- [36 : 22] Look at verse 15. And I commend joy for man is no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful for this will go with him in his toil through all the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.
- You see, we can live like that now even in this bitter world because we know as the hymn writer says that he has kept the best in store. That we have enough yet not too much to long for more.
- A yearning for a deeper peace not known before. I wonder if you could sing that hymn or write that hymn.

Well, if and when you can. You've understood what this writer is telling us in this book. Let's pray. Let's pray. I thank you, Lord, that here our lives though richly blessed cannot attain the peace they seek in earnest quest nor ever shall till face to face with Christ they rest.

And so, Lord, we pray that you would give us hearts content and joyful because they are hearts anchored forever in your timeless kingdom.

[37 : 55] help us to eagerly long for that coming glory and yet to wait for it with patience with enduring patience and with joy even now in the perfect peace that you alone can give to your people.

Help us for in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.