

Look On The Blight Side

Ecclesiastes 9:11-10:1 November 13, 2024

Do you consider yourself a pessimist or an optimist? Compared to other nationalities, Americans are some of the most pessimistic people. When asked if they think the world is getting better, only 6% of Americans said yes. If you think that's bad, nearly 1 out of every 3 Americans say they believe humanity will be extinct in the next century.¹

There *are* optimists, of course. Clint Eastwood is quoted as saying, "*I don't believe in pessimism. If something doesn't come up the way you want, forge ahead. If you think it's going to rain, it will.*"

But *does* pessimism bring the rain? Even the most optimistic person here would have to admit that Clint's quote is more wishful thinking than anything else. We don't control the weather.

We live in a wonderful world full of beauty and supply and discovery and adventure. But, at the same time, life in this world can be incredibly frustrating. This reality is often rife with suffering, unfairness, disappointment, and sorrow.

Optimism *doesn't* keep the clouds away, as I'm sure many of you who had an outdoor wedding can confirm. On Monday we took a day trip to Yosemite. It was a *beautiful* day...until it wasn't. In the mid-afternoon a cloud suddenly rolled in. Before we knew it, rain was pouring down and, since it was so cold, snow even started to flurry.

It was fun for *us*, but there was at least one couple who did not appreciate the sudden change - the lady and gentleman who were taking their wedding pictures outside the Yosemite Valley chapel. They were doing their best - *forging ahead* - but there was something profoundly unfair about how things turned out for them. Of course, we're used to that kind of thing. "It's just part of life."

In our text tonight, the Teacher speaks frankly about the fundamental unfairness of this world. Many label him a pessimist, but that's not quite right. Certainly he is distressed by the world he lives in and has studied so closely, but the Teacher isn't just a cynical Eeyore here to ruin the party. He's honest about what we're up against. Look at the world, look at your life, and you'll find many happy occurrences, days filled with achievement and joy. But in the same life you'll find when things went the *other* way, and not because of something you did or some mistake you made, but simply because this world is broken. What *should* happen doesn't always happen.

Ecclesiastes 9:11 - ¹¹Again I saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, or the battle to the strong, or bread to the wise, or riches to the discerning, or favor to the skillful; rather, time and chance happen to all of them.

¹ <https://reason.com/2016/07/07/american-pessimism-only-6-percent-think/>

The Teacher isn't talking about *The Tortoise And The Hare* here. In that case, the Hare gets what he deserves. These are instances where *chance* twists the outcome. Think of any obviously terrible sports call - Maradona's hand-of-God goal in the 1986 World Cup. The rightful winner simply doesn't always win.

Nikola Tesla died broke while Pablo Escobar died with \$70 billion.

Or consider stories like that of Donald Peters. For 20 years he would buy a pair of lottery tickets from his local 7-Eleven. On November 1, 2008 Donald bought his tickets, like he always did. He died later that day. And then the numbers were announced: Donald's ticket won \$10 million.²

There have been times when *you* should've been selected for the promotion, the position, the opportunity, but it didn't happen. Why? Because time and chance hold sway over this world.

Even so, the Teacher isn't saying that it's stupid to train or strengthen ourselves or to learn to be wise and skillful. He's already shown how doing those things *can* dramatically help you in life *and* benefit the world around you. The point is that you cannot *guarantee* outcomes in this life.

Ecclesiastes 9:12 - ¹² For certainly no one knows his time: like fish caught in a cruel net or like birds caught in a trap, so people are trapped in an evil time as it suddenly falls on them.

The Teacher often reminds us of our impending deaths, but that's not the only thing he's referring to here.³ He also means the regular misfortunes of life that grab the guilty and innocent alike, like a self-springing trap.⁴ Ours is a dangerous world, full of thorns and tangles and snares.

The Teacher considers time and chance to be "evil." A cruel net. A system that works against people, whether they're wise or foolish, righteous or wicked. Not as it *should* be.

Ecclesiastes 9:13 - ¹³ I have observed that this also is wisdom under the sun, and it is significant to me:

Wisdom should *always* triumph, but we're under the sun in a reality where Adam and Eve traded God's wisdom for man's wisdom and now, things are different. Just as the rules of movement and survival change when you submerge under water, so reality changed under the sun when sin came.

The Teacher invites us to look at a particular case study that proves his point. He says this is *significant* to him. Your version may say it was "great" to him. Not great in the sense that he was happy about it, but in the sense that it was a major finding in his research. *This* story shows the kind of brokenness and unfairness people are up against in this world.

² <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna28485679>

³ *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*

⁴ Choon-Leong Seow *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation With Introduction And Commentary*

Ecclesiastes 9:14-15 - ¹⁴ **There was a small city with few men in it. A great king came against it, surrounded it, and built large siege works against it.** ¹⁵ **Now a poor wise man was found in the city, and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man.**

Scholars argue over what the Teacher really said in this story. One of two things happened: Either this poor wise man figured out the way to save his town and then, despite his heroism, he was forgotten and unrewarded, *or* the Teacher might be saying that this poor wise man *could have* saved the town, but because of his social status, he was ignored and the town was destroyed.⁵

Either outcome would've been bad. Yes, the second option is much *more* bad, but neither is *right*. But, despite what *should be*, this world values a lot of things that don't actually matter. Things like social status, style, the class a person is in, the hype that surrounds them. It still happens today.

This is a serious blight in the system. Let's say the wise man *did* successfully save his city. Wouldn't you want to then give that guy a position of leadership? But, they didn't, because he wasn't cool enough or rich enough or important enough. He's written off - never paid back for his service.

How often has history shown people choosing defeat and destruction because they were too proud to humble themselves to do the wise thing? Isn't that the case with those who refuse salvation in Jesus Christ? Psalm 149 tells us that God adorns the humble with salvation.⁶ But so many people refuse to humble themselves and instead choose humiliation in the end.

Ecclesiastes 9:16 - ¹⁶ **And I said, "Wisdom is better than strength, but the wisdom of the poor man is despised, and his words are not heeded."**

"Wisdom is better than strength" was probably a popular maxim during the Teacher's time - one of those things people say like, "Cheaters never prosper." "Every cloud has a silver lining." "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." True? *Kinda*. Maybe.

In an *ideal* world, wisdom *is* better than strength. But in *this* world, wisdom is disdained far too often. Think of the Apostle Paul on the ship sailing to Rome. *He* knew they were making unwise choices to keep sailing late into the season. He warned them to head to port and wait out the winter. But unwise men wanted pleasure, wanted convenience, wanted their payday, wanted to be seen as the experts, and so they sailed right into the Euroclydon and almost paid with their lives.⁷

Our world's rebellion against wisdom is a feature, not a bug. That doesn't mean we should all give up on this world or give up on wise living, and just recede into ourselves. In fact, chapter 10 is all about the consequences of folly. And we've already seen that wise living, even in our broken system, can bring a lot of advantages to a life and community. But we shouldn't be surprised when the world around us goes the way of fools. Cooler heads do *not* always prevail.

⁵ Seow

⁶ Psalm 149:4

⁷ Acts 27:9-44

Ecclesiastes 9:17 - ¹⁷The calm words of the wise are heeded more than the shouts of a ruler over fools.

That is better translated, “Wise words, spoken quietly *should* be heeded rather than the leader of fools.”⁸ But the system is broken. Once again, what *should* be true usually isn’t here under the sun.⁹

Let me ask you this: If you turn on *any* cable news show tonight, what are you most likely to see? A calm and thoughtful person making a reasoned case full of solutions for the world’s problems? Or, will you see four people all shouting over one another, saying nothing particularly sage or helpful?

Ours is a shouting society. That’s not a good thing. Let’s not be a shouting people to our family or in our community or online toward those we disagree with.

Ecclesiastes 9:18 - ¹⁸Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner can destroy much good.

If this was where Ecclesiastes ended, it would be pretty bleak. Remember, this is a *major* finding in his research. This is the way things are in this world, vividly illustrated in the next verse.

Ecclesiastes 10:1 - Dead flies make a perfumer’s oil ferment and stink; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

All the work of gathering the ingredients, reducing them down, straining and purifying them, storing them properly, then mixing them all together in a careful recipe to make this costly bottle of perfume. And then *one little fly* randomly lands in the batch and it’s all wasted. Ruined. *Hevel*.

The Teacher says the same is true when a single “bungler” enters a situation in life.¹⁰ He doesn’t even necessarily mean a purposefully evil person. But *that’s* how things go under the sun.

The Bible is full of examples of the incredible, destructive power of sin and folly. Achan’s impulsive decision to take a few goods out of Jericho led to a shocking defeat of Israel’s army. Solomon’s own son Rehoboam made a foolish political decision and instantly the kingdom of Israel, which had never been stronger, wealthier, or more at peace was ruined. Split in two.

As I said, if this were the end of the book, it would be pretty hopeless. But it’s *not* the end. By the end, the Teacher will have discovered not only what *is* but also he finds the answer to what we should do about it. His findings are basic, considering he was writing centuries before Christ’s arrival. In his conclusion, having seen the brokenness of the world and the difficulties of life, he says, “Here’s what you do: Fear God, follow Him, and enjoy the life He has given you *even though*

⁸ Duane A. Garrett *The New American Commentary, Volume 14: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

⁹ Seow

¹⁰ Roland Murphy *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 23a: Ecclesiastes*

our life experiences are dominated by time, death, and chance. God is real. He is sovereign. He knows what we don't, so live as joyfully and happily as you can and trust that God will do the right thing." That's the culmination of the Teacher's lifelong research.

But, before we close, I think it's important that we wrestle with this for a moment. Given what the Teacher discovered about the broken, *hevel* nature of the world under the sun, is his finding *sufficient*? We know a *lot* more about the plan and Person of God than Solomon did. We *don't* think about life from an agnostic, secular humanist perspective, but rather in the knowledge of what God does and what He has promised and what He is capable of.

Knowing what we know, how are we to reckon with the unfairness that pervades this reality? If God is sovereign, how do we square that with the *chance* horrors of life? The nagging problems of pain, suffering, injustice, many of which are arbitrary not only from our perspective, but frankly from *history's* perspective? We know God *could* remove His people or exempt them from the consequences of sin. He's done it before. But, in most cases He *doesn't*. The cruel net grabs young and old, good and bad alike. And often without direct spiritual purpose.

It's estimated that 16,000 children die every single day around the world. Eleven every minute.¹¹ When people suffer around us, as theological conservatives we tend to assuage ourselves by saying, "God must be trying to teach us something." Or, "God will bring specific good out of *that* situation." But is that just a not-quite-real maxim like "every cloud has a silver lining?"

Did all those children die today because God had things He wanted to teach people? More than 225,000 people died in the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. As far as I know, none of them became a modern Lazarus. Rather, if we're honest, it seems to be more Ecclesiastes 9 than Genesis 50.

Jesus Himself seemed to reference the arbitrary randomness of suffering inherent to this world in Luke 13. A group of people came to complain to Him about injustice. In response He said, "A tower fell and killed 18 people in Siloam. Do you think that happened because they were more sinful than other people?" The answer was no. The fact of the matter is that tragedy, injustice, and unfairness are baked into this world because of the ruinous impact of sin. How do we square that with what we know about God?

On the one hand, we take to heart that wonderful promise from Psalm 31 that "My times are in Your hands." But we also experience the same reality that the Teacher brought out here: People are trapped in an *evil time* under the sun. These findings have serious implications.

If God is sovereign and He cares about us and He *can* deliver, then why doesn't He? Why does Peter go free while James is beheaded?

It's wise to consider these questions because this *is* the major accusation people use when they reject the Gospel. And we should be careful in how we answer these questions because we may

¹¹ <https://ourworldindata.org/much-better-awful-can-be-better>

inadvertently back ourselves into a theological corner where God is a monster making sport of us. Or, we may convince ourselves that every difficulty would go away if we could *just* learn the spiritual lesson. That suffering *always* exists because I'm being disciplined or instructed.

We must start by thinking about the sovereignty of God. The Bible clearly, explicitly teaches that God is sovereign. The Teacher agrees, while also noting that *chance* impacts everyone, both righteous and unrighteous. Evil touches all of our lives, yet *God cannot be the Author of evil*.

When you think of sovereignty, what do you imagine? Do we picture it as God standing before a vast, soulless machine which only He operates - pulling levers and flipping toggles in whatever order He wants while each gear underneath turns in lifeless obligation? Is the universe simply a great bin of Legos that God alone is constructing, posing, and adjusting with no other input?

That is a view of sovereignty held by many faithful Christians, commonly known as "Divine determinism," or "meticulous providence." The problem is that this view of sovereignty leads invariably to *God* being the cause of the suffering in our world. Even the suffering that we have to admit does *not* lead to any lesson being learned or eventual Joseph-esque reveal in the end. And it also conflicts with some very straightforward teachings in Scripture like: "God does not tempt anyone," yet we are tempted.

On the polar opposite you have what is called "Open Theism." If you boil down this view, the idea is that God is *not* totally sovereign - in fact He doesn't even really know what's going to happen in the future. He's just super powerful and is *reacting* to things. Proponents of this view will say things like God is "experimenting," and "taking risks" with us.¹² All I can say is, "Yikes."

There is another perspective called "Relational sovereignty." Where "God's will is settled in terms of the intention of His character" and His overall plan for this world, but meanwhile He personally relates to us and invites us to individually, truly cooperate with Him, not as pawns but as partners.¹³

What does that mean? It means your life is not just a toggle God is switching, but He allows you to make an impact on His heart and activity. You can please Him. You can grieve Him. You can anger Him. You can hasten His coming. You can delay His stated intentions in your life. All of these things are said and exemplified in the both Testaments of the Bible. But that means there is *flex* in the providence and sovereignty of God. Does that mean things can happen that He wasn't aware of or happen outside of His authority? No. He is sovereign over all the universe. But He is sovereign over His sovereignty. And, as King, He has freed the wills of human beings and humans now make a difference as we interact with Him. As God reigns, He invites us to live in this *hevel* world as active partners in His grace. We will be subject to the futility of this world just as Jesus Himself was subject to it in His Incarnation. Though time, death, and chance often work against us, and though this fallen, failing, soon-to-be-dissolved world actively tries to trap us and hinder us, *none* of it can succeed in separating us from the *love* of God in this *real* relationship we have with Him.

¹² <https://reknew.org/2015/01/does-the-open-view-undermine-gods-sovereignty/>

¹³ Roger Olsen *A Relational View Of God's Sovereignty*

One author put it this way: "As a relational God, He patiently interacts with us without ever compromising His core nature or objectives. God does not need us, but in His sovereignty, He chooses to include us. We matter to the process. God's ends are settled and unilateral, but the means to His ends are open for discussion."¹⁴

Understanding that God's sovereignty is accomplished through a *love relationship* can give us a lot of hope, perspective, and excitement.

It gives us *hope* because we know that even though we *are* impacted by time, death, and chance under the sun, we have a faithful Friend and Savior Who *does* care about us and Who *does* keep the score with the intention of settling it in eternity. And He allows us to impact *His* heart and activity as we respond to His love and grace by loving and obeying Him in return.

It gives us *perspective* because we realize that God *could* remove us like He removed Enoch, but instead He has decided to leave us here, under the sun. Why? So that we can be salt and light. So we can lead others to salvation. So that we can be a part of restraining evil through the power of the Holy Spirit. God leaves you here so that maybe *you* can, in some small or large sense, be the wise person in the city under attack. You have God's truth, His wisdom, His mandate. These are better than weapons of war. These are more precious than gold. These keep our world from spiraling into total ruin. Your life is meant to be an example of what is possible and what is coming.

And having that perspective should give us a lot of excitement. Your life might not be *appreciated* by the world around you, but *God* appreciates it. He gave it to you for a reason. He put you where you are and gave you real freedom and empowering to not only bring Him glory, but also so that *you* could actually *please* the Lord Himself. And *you* can be a meaningful, heroic part of His merciful, redemptive work. Your simple life shining as a beacon of how the Lord is going to make all things right one day. How *hesed* not *hevel* defines the people of God.

Yes, the world is unfair. Yes, sometimes it rains on our wedding day. Yes, sometimes we suffer under the sun - intensely - not because we're being disciplined, not because God's is going to use it to start some new ministry, not because we need to learn something, but because the world is sick with time, death, and chance.

But knowing what is really true and knowing what is really going on and knowing what is really going to happen because God *is* sovereign, as Peter said in his second letter, "It's clear what sort of people we should be:" People who understand that my focus does *not* have to be on the failures of earth, but the faithfulness of God as we fear Him and follow Him and are able to do so joyfully and contentedly in spite of the sufferings of this present time. No matter the unfairness, no matter the circumstances we can trust Him and thank Him for His faithful love endures forever.

¹⁴ <https://www.prmi.org/relational-sovereignty-a-view-that-makes-room-for-prayer/>