**Surviving in a dangerous world**
**Ecclesiastes 8:1-9:10**

We're looking at Ecclesiastes, this sustained investigation of life 'under-the-sun', where God plays no meaningful part and this life is all there is. And in such a world, there are no moral absolutes or, at least, what are considered absolutes - what's good or bad, moral or immoral, can change. And that makes life unstable, even a bit dangerous. Because you don't know what's acceptable anymore. Can I say this, or believe this or not? What words, or pronouns, am I allowed to use? And what happens if I get it wrong?

And in today's passage, the Preacher says that if you're to survive in such a world you need wisdom. Verse 1, 'Who is like the wise?' And the answer?: no-one. To navigate the complexities of a secular world, you're going to need to be wise. And Proverbs 9:10 says, '*The fear of the Lord* is the beginning of wisdom', because the wise person knows that to handle life, and especially life in a secular world, you need help from outside yourself, from above the sun.

But then look what the Preacher says, 'And who knows the interpretation of a thing?' (v1). And the answer is: the wise person. But that phrase, 'the interpretation of a thing', might ring some bells. Because it was the ability to do exactly that, to rightly interpret people's dreams, and the world they lived in, that meant men like Joseph and Daniel could so skilfully navigate life in a pagan world. And so, the Preacher's saying, if you're going to survive you need to become like them. And as you do, rather than a secular world leaving you feeling defeated, and unsure of yourself, you can thrive; v1 again: 'A man's wisdom makes his face shine.'

However, the Preacher also wants you to see that, just like Joseph and Daniel, one area where you're going to be tested is unpredictable leaders.

**Authority in a Secular World**
The French diplomat, Joseph de Maistre, wrote, 'Every nation gets the government it deserves.' And so does every culture. Because in a secular culture, with no means of saying what's unchangeably good and right, don't be surprised if you end up with leaders who shift, or backtrack on what they say is right, or now approve of what's wrong, and want to impose that on others.

Verses 3-4, 'He [the king] does whatever he pleases. *For the word of the king is supreme.*' You see, remove God from the picture and what becomes supreme? What decides what's moral or immoral, good or bad, what's to be enforced or not? The king, or some demagogic leader, or the majority, or a forceful minority. But history is full of examples of why every one of those is a terrible basis for deciding what's moral or not. Because in a world where there are no absolutes, to quote Voldemort, 'There is no good and evil. There is only power.' As the Preacher says in v9, 'All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt.'

In other words, in an under-the-sun world, with no God and no final judgment, don't be surprised if governments and leaders become increasingly oppressive, and use their authority to harm - to silence, or in today's speak, to cancel, those it disagrees with. As George Orwell, author of 1984 and Animal Farm said, 'The further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those who speak it.'

And so the Bible just takes for granted that though government is established by God for the good of people, it can be turned for evil. And when it is, when it's given over to the worship of other gods, the Bible repeatedly pictures it as one beast after another, devouring all before it.

When Moses was preparing the people to enter the Promised Land, he said that every future king should 'write for himself in a book a copy of this law… and it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God.' (Deut 17:18-19). In other words, every king, every government, every culture, needs to know, it's not your word that's supreme, but God's. And it's only that that will keep you from tyranny.

'Yeah, but hang on' you might say, 'religious authorities have been at least as tyrannous as secular ones.' Sure. Secular, or religious, how leaders govern critically depends on the gods they worship. And when it comes to so-called Christian ones, the problem's not that they've been Christian, it's that they've not been Christian enough.

But when authorities bow before the secular gods of expressive individualism, or money, or power, you're going to need wisdom in dealing with them.

Verses 2-3, 'Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him. Be not hasty to go from his presence.' So, even when you think the person in authority is heading down the wrong path, even when you're tempted to say to your boss, or the government, v4, 'What are you doing?', and give it to them with both barrels, the Preacher is saying: don't be quick to do that. Don't be quick to walk away or storm out. God has established these authorities, so the wise person will have a disposition to honour them.

Instead, be patient, v5-6, 'The wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. For there is a time and way for everything.' So there may well come a time when you need to stand up and speak out, even if it costs you. 'Do not take your stand in an evil cause' the Preacher says, v3. But wisdom picks its battles. Wisdom chooses the hills it's going to die on.

Now, in case you hadn't heard, wolves are back in Switzerland. Which adds a certain excitement to your hike and overnight camp. Jesus said, 'I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.' (Matt 10:16). And to be surrounded by wolves is not a great situation to be in, is it? And Jesus is saying, the world you go out into is not spiritually neutral. There are predators. So, be shrewd. But as you do, be innocent, maintain your integrity.

And you should do that, the Preacher says, because though the person in authority has power, it's not supreme power. Verse 8, 'No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it.' So however powerful the cultural or political elite are, compared to God, their power is very limited. They can't control the present, let alone the future. And besides, as Derek Kidner puts it, 'wickedness digs its own grave' - it just has this way of over-reaching itself. So, when it comes to the crunch, don't compromise your integrity. You may not keep your job to see it, you may not even live to see it, but truth and good will triumph. Because, the Preacher's saying, the only all powerful and sovereign king is God.

But that raises a problem, doesn't it? Because if God is in ultimate control, how do you account for the way the world is? Because you can experience good or bad *regardless* of how you live. So how are you supposed to live in a world where not just leaders, but life itself is unpredictable.

**Life and Death in a Secular World**

Now, when someone gets the glory for something someone else did, and they don't deserve it, it can be hard to swallow, can't it?

Well, the Preacher sees something worse. Verse 10, 'Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place *and were praised in the city where they had done such things*. This also is vanity.' So it's not just that this person did nothing to deserve the praise they got, it's that they did the opposite. I mean, they even get praised by the very people they or exploited, or manipulated, or lied to. And that's *hebel*, the Preacher says.

Why? Because it doesn't matter how many people praise something, or affirm something; it doesn't matter if the whole city can't see what this guy did was wrong, if it's wrong, it's wrong. And everyone celebrating it doesn't make it right. As GK Chesterton said, 'Right is right, even if nobody does it. Wrong is wrong even if everybody is wrong about it.'

The problem is, the Preacher says, that failure to name wrong as wrong, the failure of justice, leads to moral decay in a culture. 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.' In other words, if you give the impression that crime pays, or that one group can get away with it, or that what's wrong is actually right, sin multiplies.

And when that's happening in a culture, there's a temptation: Maybe I should fudge things morally. Maybe I should be less black and white. Maybe I should be less concerned about *my* integrity.

And that can be heightened by the fact that bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people, so what's the point in being good? Verse 14, 'There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.' In other words, the Preacher's saying, if in a secular world living a life of virtue is not rewarded, or even the opposite happens, why bother living a life of virtue?

Okay, but that's not all. Because if there's the injustice of life, how about the equality of death? Because you can live as good a life as you like, but you're still going to die. Chapter 9:2-3, 'It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all.' So you can be deeply religious or deeply atheist, highly moral or totally immoral, but you still die. You still end up as worm food. And, you'll still get forgotten. So why spend so much time worrying about being good?

But to think like that is to misread the world.

In *The Magician's Nephew*, CS Lewis describes how Uncle Andrew gets to witness the founding of Narnia, and Aslan the Lion singing everything into being. But Uncle Andrew doesn't hear it as singing, because he doesn't want to: 'He tried his hardest to make believe that it wasn't singing and never had been singing - only roaring as any lion might… "Of course it can't really have been singing, I must have imagined it. I've been letting my nerves get out of order. Who ever heard of a lion singing?" And Lewis says, you can read things wrongly like that because, 'what you see and

hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of person you are.'

Exactly, the Preacher would say. The way you read the injustices of life and the fact that death treats everyone the same, depends on where you're standing, on what sort of person you are. Are you looking at the world through the lens of secularism or the lens of wisdom.

You see the wise person understands that there will be an accounting after death. Verse 12, 'Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.'

Look at life from an under the sun, this life is all there is, view point, and the injustices of life are going to be a problem, because you're going to have a hard time saying why there's any ultimate reason to pursue the good. But take CS Lewis' advice and change where you're standing; fear God, take an 'above the sun' approach to life, see that there will be a final reckoning, a day of judgment, and things begin to look very different. And it begins to matter hugely how you live.

And by changing the way you see life, the Preacher says, you'll also realise that the circumstances of someone's life don't tell us everything. Chapter 9:1, 'But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hands of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know, both are before him.' So life can be going great, or not; people can love you or hate you, affirm you or cancel you; you can have 25 million followers or none, and it doesn't tell you anything about God's approval of you. The righteous are in God's hands, the Preacher says, whether they're loved or hated. And so the wise person reads the love and hate of the world wisely - they understand that what God says and what a secular world says, can be very different.

And yet, the Preacher's not naive is he?

**Wisdom Has its Limits**

Look at v16-17, 'When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes sleep, then 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.'

In other words, the Preacher says, try and understand everything about life and you're never going to find rest, because there are some questions you're never going to get an answer to. And some answers just seem to raise more questions. And you can end up paralysed.

Instead, he says, you need to learn to trust. You need to learn to accept that you're finite and only God is infinite. That you can know somethings, but only God can know all things.

As he said through Isaiah, 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.' (Is 55:8-9).

Now, you might say, 'Come on, that's a cop-out! That's no different from the secular person you've been accusing of burying their head in the sand and not facing the consequences of their world-

view? Now you're also saying, don't think too hard about things.' Except the secular person who wants to live a good life has to live inconsistent with their world view. While the person who lives with an above the sun view of life, and fears God, and realises their limitations, is living entirely consistent with their world view. It embraces it, not hides from it. So one leads to intellectual and moral dissonance, the other to a whole and integrated life.

But think about it: if the secular view of life is right, and ultimately life has no meaning, why do we innately want to find it? Why *do* people lie awake at night, trying to find the answers?

Because, the Preacher's saying, you've been made to know the One who does know everything.

**Foretastes of a Better World**
Look at chapter 9:7, 'Go!'

So, after saying, 'read secular leaders, and life, and your limits wisely', the Preacher now says, 'yes and then *do* something.'

And look what he says to do, v7, 'eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart.' Now, one of the things you learn as a junior doctor is to gulp your food down, because you never know when that cardiac arrest bleep is going to go off and you're running, leaving your lunch behind. And so Su and I had to re-train ourselves to eat slowly. And the Preacher's saying, after wisdom, your defence against the *hebel* of a secular world is to savour your food, and enjoy the wine.

Why? Because, v7, 'God has already approved of what you do'. Because it's God who made you to enjoy these things. So, as you do, you're living in the grain of creation, as you were made to live, and not against the grain, as the secular world-view would have you live. But also because these are his good gifts to you. As Psalm 104 says, he has given us 'wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart' (Ps 104:15). So enjoy them as you would any gift. And as you do you're acknowledging God as the God of all grace. The very thing the secular world denies.

And then, the Preacher says, v8, 'Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.' Now, a religious person might think, surely, the response to the *hebel* of a secular world should be sackcloth and ashes! And the Preacher says, 'O no! Fight the culture of death and live as those who know that life is beautiful.'

And verse 9, 'Enjoy life with the wife whom you love.' Now, just think about all that. Food, and wine, and white clothing; and enjoying your wife, what does that sound like to you? Doesn't it sound like a wedding? Exactly, the Preacher says, live like you've been invited to a wedding feast. Because you have.

Because these things we get to enjoy now are foretastes, promises, of a feast thrown by a King more real than unpredictable leaders, in a kingdom more lasting than the injustices of life and death.

And Jesus said of himself that he came 'eating and drinking' - in fact, eating and drinking enough that the religious people said, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and

sinners!' (Matt 11:19) Because he is a friend of sinners! Because he is the God of all grace. Because he is the feast-throwing King.

And it's because of Jesus that we can know more fully than the Preacher ever knew, that 'God has already approved of what you do' (v7). Because by Jesus dying for us, by him taking the punishment we deserve, we don't have to do anything to earn God's approval. We already have it. And every time we remember his death by taking the bread and wine at communion, we do so in anticipation of the far greater feast to come.

Paul wrote, 'Because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.' (1 Cor 1:30). Christ is the wisdom we all need. Look at life through his death and resurrection and you'll begin to read the world - leaders, and life, and death, our own limits - right.

And as we do, we'll find courage to keep going in an increasingly secular world. As the Preacher says in v10, 'Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.' Follow a secular world view through to its logical conclusion and it's hard to see why you should do anything with all your might, because everything's pointless. See the world through the lens of Christ and your work - even for unpredictable bosses, even though someone else might get rewarded for it, is full of meaning.

As Paul said, 'Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ' (Col 3:23-24).

Believe in an under-the-sun world and everything is *hebel*. See this world as a foretaste of the world *above* the sun, and, as the Preacher says, you will 'Go and live!'