The Art of Living
Ecclesiastes 9:11-10:20

We're looking at Ecclesiastes, and the writer, the Preacher he calls himself, is investigating, v11, life, 'Under the sun' - life when God either doesn't exist, or plays no meaningful part. And he's been relentless in pointing out the flaws of that world view - that it gives you no basis for working out what's right or wrong; it gives you no hope for the future, and so no purpose for life. And then we come to today's passage. And one commentator says of this passage: 'Of all the passages in Ecclesiastes, this one is probably the most difficult to interpret and to preach.' Which, by the standards of Ecclesiastes, is saying something!

And yet, what I hope you're going to see is that the point the Preacher's making is pretty clear: When a whole society goes secular, no God and no eternity, you face two choices as to how to live. And both will have radical impacts on your life.

So, we're going to look at 4 things: 1. The art of living; 2. The Fragility of Popularity; 3. The Deadly Alternative; and 4. The Direction to Lean In.

The Art of Living
The Olympics start in 1 month. But can anyone tell me the Olympic motto? *Citius - Altius - Fortius*: Which means? Faster, higher, stronger. Ah yes, says the Preacher, but the fastest, the strongest, and the jumpiest don't always win, do they? Life doesn't always work like that. Verse 11, 'I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favour to those with knowledge.' In other words, going into the Olympics you might be a dead cert to win, but it doesn't mean you will; you can have the perfect resumé for that new job but it doesn't mean you'll get it; you and that person you're romantically interested in - seems such a great fit, but it just never happens.

Why? Because, the Preacher says, v11, 'Time and chance happen to them all.' Maybe you miss a crucial email because it mysteriously went into junk; or someone offers you something and you go, 'If only you'd called me yesterday!' Maybe there's a hold up on the autoroute and you miss your flight, and everything falls apart from there. 'Time and chance', the Preacher says. And in a secular, under the sun, scientific-materialistic world where there is no divine author of events, there's no one weaving your story, life's just a thing of random chance.

The British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, was asked what it was that knocked governments off course. He replied, 'Events, dear boy, events.' But it's not just governments, the Preacher says. Verse 12, 'Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.' We all know what it's like to be knocked off course by stuff outside our control. Your company's taken over and your job's suddenly uncertain. You receive a diagnosis you dread. Someone in your lab has been making stuff up and it impacts you. Events can come at you from out of the blue and profoundly alter your life, but like a net or a snare it's inescapable, 'But I didn't ask for this to happen' we might say. Sure, the Preacher says, but it happened.

Su and I have just finished a book called, *'The Art of Dying'* - not because we have plans to just yet, but because a big part of dying well is first living well. But in a world where life can be seriously unpredictable, how do you learn the art of living? Which world-view, the Preacher wants you to ask, best equips you for life: an 'under the sun' secular one: no God, no eternity, no point to life, and life really is time and chance? Or an 'above the sun' one, where God is in sovereign control of events,

where as Paul says, he 'works all things according to the counsel of his will' (Eph 1:11) - even takeovers, and job applications, and romance, and auto-routes?

Well to answer that, the Preacher presents us with two types of people. And the first is the wise man. Verses 13-15: 'I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city.'

Little city, few men. Great king, great siegeworks. The outcome's certain, isn't it! Because the race is always to the swift and the battle to the strong, right? Wrong! But here, it's not time and chance that make the difference. It's wisdom. And there are times in life when you can feel under siege - maybe by events or circumstances; maybe by the direction of travel of society. And to come through that, the Preacher says, you need wisdom.

But in the Bible, wisdom is never just an intellectual thing, is it? It's not that this poor but wise man was actually a secret expert in urban warfare. In the Bible wisdom's less about your IQ and more about how you see and read the world. And as we've seen before, the foundation of true wisdom is realising there is a world, and a King, above the sun. Proverbs 1:7: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.' Proverbs 9:10: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.' So if you really want to negotiate life with skill, and learn the art of living, you start by acknowledging, 'I don't know; I'm not God; but God is.' As Charles Spurgeon, the Victorian preacher said, 'The doorstep to the temple of wisdom is the knowledge of our own ignorance.'

In fact, Proverbs pictures wisdom as a woman, inviting you to come dine with her, because you're hungry. 'Well, if that's the case,' she says, 'come eat with me.'

The problem is, the Preacher says, even humbling yourself under God, even trusting that he is in sovereign control and life is not just time and chance, even helping others see that like the poor but wise man, does not guarantee you a win.

The Fragility of Popularity

Verses 15-16, 'No one remembered that poor man… the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.' So you can read the world and people's problems right; you can even genuinely help them, but that doesn't mean they'll thank you for it - at least, not for long. Because in a secular world, the kind of wisdom that fears God won't necessarily make you popular. But even so, the Preacher says, v16-18, 'I say that wisdom is better than might…. The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war.'

And intuitively you know he's right: that to be on the side of what's right is better than might: whether that's the ravings of a ruler who shouts everyone else down, or the majority or vocal minority, or military might. What's just and true should win the day. Except, if your world view can't tell you what's just and true; if it tells you survival is for the fittest, and strongest, it's going to have a hard time telling you *why* might isn't better than right.

But deep down you know what's right should win. Absolutely, the Preacher says, so which world view better fits with what you already know to be true? A below or an above the sun one?

The problem is that the fact that God-fearing wisdom may not win you any friends, that a world-view that says, 'there is a God, and there are moral absolutes', is going to be unpopular, can make the alternative attractive.

The Deadly Alternative

You see, Proverbs tells us that Lady Wisdom isn't the only one inviting you for dinner. Proverbs 9:13-16, 'The woman Folly is loud; she is seductive… She sits at the door of her house… calling to those who pass by… "Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!"'

And just like wisdom, in the Bible folly, being a fool, is not about your intellect. You can have multiple degrees and a whole alphabet of letters after your name, and still be a fool. Because, the Psalmist says, 'The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'' (Ps 14:1). Which means, the way the Bible sees being a fool is to misread life, the universe and everything and think, 'this life is all there is. No moral absolutes, no final judgment.' And today, to live like that will earn you more praise in the public square than wisdom.

The problem is, the Preacher says, there are five reasons why that's a bad idea.

Firstly, ***folly is self-destructive.***

Chapter 10:1, 'Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour.' Imagine a master perfumer, who's designed this incredibly expensive face cream, guaranteed to remove wrinkles, and it smells of summer. But he leaves the lid off, and the flies get in, and the next time he smells it it smells like a cow-pat in summer. And the Preacher's saying, you can have spent your life building up your reputation, but drop your guard, follow through on a bad choice, live as if there is no God, and you can tear down everything you've built up. One stupid remark, one moment of madness, and your reputation's gone.

But folly will also lead you to treat others badly because you won't have a good reason not to. But if you do, in the end it's you who's harmed. Verse 8, 'He who digs a pit will fall into it.' Now, unless you're from Northern Ireland you probably haven't heard of Edwin Poots. Well, he's a politician who recently engineered the downfall of his party leader. And having brought her down, he won the election for her job promising that, unlike her, he'd listen to party members. Except just three weeks later, this week he was ousted for having failed to listen to his party. Dig a pit for others, the Preacher says, and watch where you're walking. Treat your colleagues, friends or family badly and that's how you'll be treated. What goes around comes around.

And v8, 'A serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall.' Now, in ancient Israel, burglars would break into houses by digging through the walls. Do that, the Preacher says, and you might just find a snake on the other side. Try and get ahead by taking from others what's theirs - like their stuff or credit for their work, and you might just get bitten.

But secondly, folly is ***self-consuming***. Verse 12, 'The words of a wise man's mouth win him favour, but the lips of a fool consume him.' Now, what the Preacher actually says is that a wise man's words are *grace*. They impart grace to others and as a result grace comes back to him. But it doesn't quite work like that with a fool: 'No God; Jesus was just plain wrong when he said we're going to give an

account for every word we say; I'm the judge of right and wrong; so if I want to tell someone how it is, I can.' Sure, but say something stupid or offensive and it just trouble on your head.
And, what you say confirms you in what you think, doesn't it? Speak out your anger, or your bitterness, or your hatred, and it has this way of making you more more angry and more bitter, more fixed and certain in your opinions.

Verse 14, 'a fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be.' A fool can speak with great conviction, and be sure he's right, the Preacher's saying, but in reality he knows next to nothing about it. Why is that? Because when you take an under the sun approach to life - and there's no such thing as divine authority, it doesn't take much to start thinking you're the authority on life. And you destroy yourself from the inside out.

But thirdly, ***folly leaves you directionless***. Verse 15, 'The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.' And the city is your destination, it's where you're heading, but the person who says there is no God can't tell you where anything is heading, except into the dust of non-existence. The problem is, if that's the case, why does anything matter? It's not exactly a great motivation to hard work is it? Nope, the Preacher says, hard work is just a burden for the fool.

But fourthly, ***folly will infect the way you and others lead***. Verse 16, 'Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning!' And that word *child* doesn't just refer to someone who's young but to someone who's immature, who's never grown up. And *princes feasting in the morning* is a picture of leaders who aren't just immature they're self-indulgent. And when a nation, or an organisation, has leaders like that, it's bad news, the Preacher says. Verses 5-7: 'There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler: folly is set in high places, and the rich sit in a low place. I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves.'

Now, the Preacher's not saying, 'the rich upper classes should have the power!' It's that the nobility were the ones educated and trained for leadership and responsibility. But when a society thinks this life is all there is, so *my* in-group, or *my* political view, or *my* wealth, is what counts, and there's no sense of 'one day I will give an account', don't be surprised if you end up with a fool in charge, making bad and unqualified appointments.

The problem is, get it wrong, lead from the wrong world view and it comes with a cost. Because fifthly, ***folly brings decay***: Verse 18, 'Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks.' Now, on the one hand, that's metaphorical. Assume an under the sun approach to life - no God, no moral absolutes, there will inevitably be a moral decay in society. But it's also true *literally*. Because when officials don't fear God, when there's no sense of giving an account at the end of your life, and life is about getting rich, through back handers if necessary, don't be surprised if the roads don't get fixed and projects run over budget.

So, the Preacher's saying, if folly is self-destructive, and self-consuming, and leaves you directionless, and infects leadership, and brings decay, don't you want to pursue wisdom instead, even if it's unpopular?

The Direction to Lean In

There's a quote attributed to Winston Churchill that he almost certainly never said, but it's still a great quote: "If you're not a liberal at 20, you have no heart. But if you're not a conservative by the time you're 40, you have no brain."

Well, the Preacher says, chapter 10:2, 'A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left.' But you may be sad or glad to hear he's not talking political parties. He's not saying the wise person will always vote UDC or Conservative or Republican, only a fool would vote Democrat. He's saying that what makes a wise person a wise person, and a fool a fool, is the direction their heart is pointing in. What determines whether you will navigate life with skill, even if no one thanks you for it, or you get consumed by folly, is what your heart is leaning into.

And the heart of the wise man inclines to the right and the fool's to the left, the Preacher says. Because in the ancient world the right hand side was symbolic of authority and saving power, of protection and blessing. And the heir to the throne sat on the king's right hand, and you blessed others in God's name with your right hand.

So to incline your heart to the right is to say, I'm going to lean into goodness and justice and protection and blessing. But which world view will help you do that? A world view that cannot tell you what goodness and right and wrong are, a world-view that cannot tell you who should be protected and why can hardly do that, can it?

But Christianity can, because it's the only thing that can tell you what God's right hand looks like. Because the Son of His right hand became a man. And Jesus was the only truly wise man who never stumbled in folly. And if the Preacher tells us that the fool doesn't know the way to the city - Jesus did. In fact the gospel writers tell us, 'he set his face to go to Jerusalem' (Luke 9:51), knowing that going there would cost him his life. Because his leadership was the exact opposite of self-indulgent. Because it was there, at the cross, that he bore all our folly upon himself. And as he did, he opened the way for us to the city, to our ultimate home. And knowing that tells you, your life is heading somewhere, there is a destination.

Jesus told a parable about two builders. One wise, one foolish. The wise one built his house on rock. The foolish one on sand. But both were hit by a storm and only one house survived. Matthew 7:24, 'Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.' You may still be hit by a storm. And you will certainly still face a life that on the surface seems like a thing of time and chance, but build your life on Christ, find in him your significance, your value, your security, regardless of how popular or unpopular that is, and you'll come through the other side. But you've got to tilt your heart to him and his word.

Paul wrote, 'If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things which are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things that are on earth.' (Col 3:1-2).

You know, when you don't know the way somewhere, the wise person - your wife maybe - will stop and ask directions. The fool just blunders on and gets more and more lost. Jesus says, build your life on me, and you won't be lost, you'll know purpose and direction. Paul says, set your mind on Christ, see above the sun and incline your heart to where he is sat at God's right hand you'll know you're not at the mercy of time and chance. So you'll be able to face those unpredictable events of life with poise.

Incline your heart to Christ, and it will make the temptations to foolish decisions, or stupid comments, less and less attractive. And instead, knowing that he has spoken grace over you, you'll speak grace to others. And you'll model your leadership on his - and instead of being self-indulgent, you'll be self-sacrificial and you'll give not take from them. And as you do, you'll stem the tide of decay, not pull the roof down.