

Better than Wisdom

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Greg V. Arthur, September 6, 2015

John 14:6 – ⁶ Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

I'm Greg Arthur, one of the pastors here at Creekside. It is my everyday experience that what God says through this little book matters more than anything. In this Book, God reveals Himself and defines reality. And knowing God and living in His reality will save us a lot of trouble. So we are in the middle of a study of one of books of the Old Testament, the Book of Ecclesiastes, entitled 'Enjoying Life in an Uncertain World'. And today we'll look at Chapter 8 which is about the paradox of wisdom. You've heard the paradox joke, right? - Is it a paradox? Well yes and no. The paradox of wisdom is that we need wisdom but wisdom will leave us needy. Anyway I've entitled today's talk 'Better Than Wisdom'. Let me ask a question: What is better than wisdom? You'll have to stay awake all the way to the end.

Before we get started I want to tell you a story about sewage treatment because all my stories are about sewage treatment, and you all will be one day the congregation most knowledgeable about sewage treatment. Anyway, I was out on Navajo lands at the Kaibito sewage treatment plant, which was really just some ponds and a little chlorinator tank at the end. Now I'd been to a lot of college and was trained extensively by my agency, the US Environmental Protection Agency. I was one of the most knowledgeable inspectors of sewage treatment there has ever been produced by this great country education system. One of the things we'd check was whether there was enough contact time with the chlorine before the treated wastewater discharges to a creek. My boss gave me something we used called fluorescense dye to mark how long it takes for water to enter and then leave a tank. It just takes a few drops to turn a flood of water fluorescent green. So at Kaibito, with Mr. Begay, the Navajo environmental director there, I introduced a couple drops in the front of the chlorinator tank and waited. Nothing. I added double. Nothing. I added a cap full. Nothing. I added half a bottle. And bam, not only did fluorescent green water emerge from the chlorinator tank, but it went into the creek and turned the entire river bright fluorescent green ... for miles. Mr. Begay, said with a wistful sign, "I'm going to hear about this." I knew a lot but I didn't know that chlorine reacts with flourescense, and so never use it in chlorinator tanks. At least Mr. Begay could say, EPA polluted the river. Wise but not wise enough, that's essentially the point of Ecclesiastes Chapter 8.

Life Is a Breath, a Breath, a Breath

This has been a particularly illuminating series for me, as I've never myself quite understood Ecclesiastes, only bits and pieces. In fact, over the now nearly thirty years since I was first saved and over the many times of reading through the Bible, only the beginning two verse of Ecclesiastes, "vanity, vanity, all is vanity", and the last two verses at the end, "fear God and keep His commandments" could I say that I understood. What has made the rest of Ecclesiastes make sense this time around was what we all heard Jeff bring out earlier in the series, that King Solomon in the Book of Ecclesiastes is lecturing on his observations about life "under the sun", not from God's point of view above the sun, but

from mankind's point of view under the sun without reference to God. King Solomon is investigating all that can be known about life, in this life, from the fact of existence itself, "under the sun". And that insight is what makes this book make sense.

Before looking at Chapter 8, I would like for us to re-examine King Solomon's main observation about this life "under the sun", because that will inform whatever we find out in Chapter 8. And like a wise professor, King Solomon states at the very beginning his main observations is his thesis statement for the entire book.

Eccles 1:1-2 – ¹ The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. ² "Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

Again at the end of the book, King Solomon closes out with the main observation as the thesis again. King Solomon has bookended everything he has to say in Ecclesiastes about life under the sun with this one main observation.

Here it is in Hebrew. Hevel, hevel, says the Preacher, hevel, hevel, hevel. These seven words capture something so true about life, that all life is 'hevel', that all that is good, and right, and sweet about life in this world under the sun has a weariness in it, an undertone of heartbreaking sadness, bitterness, wistfulness, for life changes, nothing lasts, everything ends, the good evaporates, the sweet is ephemeral. The English translation of the Jewish word 'hevel' is usually 'vanity', meaning something that is in vain or futile or meaningless. But 'hevel' has deeper connotations beyond meaninglessness. It means a breath or a vapor or a mist, things that are barely things, here today and gone tomorrow and thus perhaps meaningless in the long view, fleeting, impermanent, transitory. Jewish scholars like the word 'fleeting' for hevel.¹

And perhaps because my former career involved waterways, I especially like the word 'ephemeral', a beautiful word for describing waters, like an ephemeral stream that dries up in the heat of the day. For there is a beauty about life that is not in vain or meaningless, even though it ends all too soon, even though it evaporates, even though it is fleeting or ephemeral like a breath.

And with heartbreaking poetry he writes that this is life: A breath, a breath, says the Preacher, a breath, a breath, a breath.

And the older I get, the more true this becomes. I lost my father last year and my mother this summer, and as we've been going through their left over possessions, which in the world of estate sales are in fact called 'ephemera', there is upon me an overwhelming understanding of 'hevel'. All of their sweet letters to each other, the mementoes from their work together, their Christmas ornaments, family pictures, old keepsakes associated with family stories, books and music, collections of things from their life in the Navy or at Purdue University, in the Philippines or White Sands Missile Range, ... all of it expresses to me now

¹ Jewish Bible Quarterly, Vol.36, No.4, pp. 211-222; 'Ecclesiastes, Fleeting and Timeless, Part I', Ethan Dor-Shav, 2008. http://jbjq.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/364/364_dorshav1.pdf

that under the sun they were but a breath, a mist, a vapor, fleeting, ephemeral, ... hevel. The scriptures capture this bittersweet truth about life perfectly.

Ps 144:4 – ⁴ Man is like a breath (hevel); his days are like a passing shadow.

And as my little bug-catching bird-watching son has grown up and gone off to bug-catching and bird-watching college, we are now in our own empty nest with the same kinds of bittersweet ephemera all around us that also testify to the same fleetingness of life that is like an ephemeral desert stream or a breath, a breath, a breath.

Much of the human expression in art captures this truth about life as well. There is the song from the classic musical, 'The King and I' called 'Hello young lovers' '... don't cry because I'm alone; all of my memories are happy tonight; I've had a love of my own'. There is the book, 'A River Runs Through It', that ends with the author saying '... nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them.'

And then there is the greatest four minutes in cinema, in the Pixar movie 'Up' which starts out telling without words the sweetest bittersweet story of the happy life Carl and Ellie had together before she died. Again, the scriptures capture this truth about life perfectly.

Ps 39:4-5 – ⁴ Lord, make me to know my end, and what is the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am. ⁵ Indeed, You have made my days as handbreadths, and my age is as nothing before You; certainly every man at his best state is but vapor (a breath, a mist, hevel).

Finally, it would not be lost on the Old Testament audience that the name of the first natural born man on earth, Abel, whose offerings pleased God, who was murdered by his brother, Cain, that his name is actually Hevel. So when King Solomon says that under the sun, all is hevel, he means human life is fleeting, ephemeral, beautiful but ended too soon, cut short by the first murder. Under the sun, life is but a breath, a breath, says the Preacher, a breath, a breath, a breath.

The Limitations of Wisdom

With this main observation in mind, now let's look at what King Solomon has to say in Chapter 8. When we opened up the Book of Ecclesiastes, we were like students sitting at the feet of a professor asking him to instruct us in wisdom. We were asking the one known far and wide as the wisest man this question: What do we need to know to be wise? And we are not poor students. We want to be skilled at living and we have been listening to him. We understand that we don't have much time, that that life is fleeting, a breath, a breath, a breath. So we sit at King Solomon's feet, we search the scriptures, we listen to pod casts, we read self-help books, we travel to conferences, and roam the earth, always asking that same question: What do we need to know to be wise?

As if it were that easy. Just learn something and it's smooth sailing. Just learn the right things and the world is our oyster. Get the right college degree, take the right class, memorize the right scripture, listen to the right radio station, and as our grandmothers say back in New Mexico, 'it's Katie bar the door'. But here in Chapter 8, King Solomon doesn't answer that question directly. He does start his answer by acknowledging that the question is a good question because being wise is good. He says:

Eccles 8:1 – ¹ Who is like a wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the sternness of his face is changed.

But after this, in the rest of Chapter 8 he answers our question with four paradoxes about wisdom. You remember the paradox joke ... well yes and no. Essentially he answers that 'it's good to be wise ... BUT'. Like a wise professor, he doesn't data dump answers. That is what I do, being more like Siri than a wise professor. **"Siri?" "How can I live wisely?"** Instead King Solomon, a master of instruction, answers our question with paradoxes, unsatisfying bits of wisdom, that leave us frustrated with more questions than we started. Why does he do this? Why doesn't he answer directly? Is it possible that he wants us to ask a better question than 'What do we need to know to be wise'? In fact, is it not true that much of teaching and learning has to do with asking the right question? So as we look at the paradoxes of wisdom presented by King Solomon to answer our question, as we hear his unsatisfying answers, let's see if better questions come to mind, perhaps maybe even the right question that King Solomon all along wanted us to ask.

First Paradox **Unpredictable Power Limits Wisdom**

The first paradox about wisdom: It's good to be wise but the unpredictable power of human authority frustrates wisdom.

You all may know that before I became the gentlest of all people, a family pastor here at Creekside, I was the scariest of people, a Federal government agent. My official title was usually Enforcement Officer. If you visited the United States Environmental Protection Agency all you would find would be mild-mannered Federal agents like me talking about nice things like clean water, clean air, fish, and little birdies and plants in the environment, and, in my case, sewage treatment. We weren't the FBI. Only a few of us 'packed heat'. But were as scary as the FBI. When we knocked on your door it was bad. For example one guy in his 30's, after my inspection had a heart attack, and when I saw him next, his hair had turned snow white. Another guy cried the whole time during a raid where we looking for buried drums, and then he was fired. We would drive up in our zero-emission electric cars and people would lose heart, for the same reasons pertaining to rulers that King Solomon feels compelled to warn his protégés of.

Eccles 8:2-9 – ² I say, "Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God. ³ Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil

matter, for he will do whatever he pleases.”⁴ Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, “What are you doing?”⁵ He who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure.⁶ For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, though a man’s trouble is heavy upon him.⁷ If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen?

King Solomon says kings notice threats to their power from those who break oaths or act strangely (I have a story about that in a minute) or work behind their back, and that kings do not let threats go unpunished, doing ‘whatever he pleases’. This is the same advice mobsters make to “keep your nose clean” or “stay out of the papers”. So here’s my story. Once I went to a chemical drum cleaning facility where the environmental director met me and a brand new EPA inspector-in-training, greeted us warmly, smiling, cracking jokes, like a great guy you might go to the game with. As he lead us winding back to his office further and further into the dark corridors behind mountains of drum, we thought nothing of it. But when we arrived, he shut the door and turned into a frothing Dr. Jekyll, yelling incoherently, and worst of all spitting, ... all just a normal day for me but for my new inspector, it was horror. I’d say that’s not how to stay off the king’s radar, not how to escape the king’s attention, for his little rant gained the full attention of the US government. This is King Solomon’s wisdom here for to his protégés.

But this wisdom is ultimately unsatisfying because really there is no telling what kings see as threats, what gains their full attention. At my agency, with every new boss there was a new initiative. One year our Eye of Mordor was on cattle ranches, and the next it was ocean outfall sewage treatment plants. One year it was on trash in storm water, and the next it was the Navy, or wineries, or cadmium and lead, or biotech. We had enforcement quotas. We gave money to states to enforce. No one could predict what we were going to do. I didn’t even know what we were going to do. Just as in King Solomon’s day as in ours today, who can know what is on the unpredictable king’s radar?

Next, King Solomon says kings define what is unlawful and they have the power to inflict the ‘experience’ of ‘trouble’ on those who do not keep ‘a royal command’. But knowing this is also ultimately unsatisfying. My little portion of the law, the Clean Water Act, started with a beautiful little idea ‘fishable swimmable waters’ and metastasized into a library-wing full of single-spaced law, statutes, regulations, guidelines, notices, standards, supporting documentation, ordinances, codes, audit reports, permits, court rulings, and briefs. I once inspected a mirror manufacturing plant where the plant engineer did not know that a portion of the Federal regulations, called 40 CFR 433.17 PSNS, and the City’s municipal code, Ordinance 2014-003 Chapter 8-2-5-2, applied to his plant, and he was fired the next week. Again, just as in King Solomon’s day and now in ours, who can know, much less keep, every ‘royal command’?

Next, King Solomon says there are proper times and procedures for the redress of grievances but even being wise in the affairs of government is ultimately unsatisfying. For this scripture says ‘a man’s trouble is heavy upon him’ even when keeping the king’s commands and following his procedures. Hernando De Soto, an economics professor in

Peru, found government red-tape around the world to be the principle barrier to legal standing.² As an example, he set out to start an entirely legal business employing one person, and he found in Peru it took nearly seven years to do it, with over 200 procedural steps (for example getting a business license would be one step) before 50 different agencies. And here in California, it's so complicated to stay legal that people hire expensive consultants, lawyers, tax experts, accountants, and lobbyists. And in most other countries, most people also have to pay bribes every step of the way. It is so true what King Solomon observes: 'If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen?' So just as in King Solomon's day and now in ours, who can follow the king's ever changing procedures?

Finally, King Solomon explains one more thing he knows about kings. Power will go to their heads and they will decide to rule over things they were never meant to rule.

Eccles 8:2-9 continued - ⁸ No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge in the time of war, and evil will not deliver those who practice it. ⁹ All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over another man to his hurt.

You've heard the line, 'absolute power corrupts absolutely'. King Solomon is saying something similar, that when kings extend their rule to what they should not rule, as they strive for more and more power, perhaps truly believing it is for the good of the people, their abuse of their 'authority over another man is to his hurt'. King Solomon's examples are interesting. The first two examples, 'authority to restrain the wind (meaning oppressing a man's spirit)' and 'authority over the day of death', are both injustices when exercised by kings ruling what they should not. And the last two examples, 'no discharge in the time of war' and 'evil will not deliver those who practice it', are both examples of what kings rightly use authority to do, to fight enemies and punish evil, but that unjust kings abuse their authority to not do.

Under the sun, how many have faced unjust oppression and unjust death at the hands of their own government? Millions? Billions? It is kings who amass power under the sun to rule over things they should not. It is kings who enforce their rule with guns, prisons, and armies, police, courts, tribunals, bureaus, and regulators. More than 20 million died in Russia at the hands of Russian rulers during Stalin's reign.³ In just four years, 45 million died in China just during Mao's cultural revolution.⁴ In two years, 4 million died in Turkey as Ataturk, purged and exiled one fourth of the country, the Armenian, Greek, and Assyrian Christian minority, declaring 'Turkey for Turks', and even changing the names of historic Biblical cities such as Smyrna to Izmir, and Ephesus to Selcuk. And how many more have suffered when enemies weren't fought and evil was allowed to flourish by corrupt rulers? In

² Hernando De Soto, 'The Mystery of Capital', Black Swan Books, Random House, London, 2001, page 18.

³ International Business Times - <http://www.ibtimes.com/how-many-people-did-joseph-stalin-kill-1111789>

⁴ The Independent - <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/maos-great-leap-forward-killed-45-million-in-four-years-2081630.html>

the past ten years, nearly 200,000 civilians died in Mexico at the hands of the cartels.⁵ And since 2014 there are now 12 million refugees from Syria and Iraq alone.⁶

History is full of bad kings, bad ruling bodies, dictatorships, polit bureaus, peoples tribunals, juntas, bad democracies, bad empires, and bad republics. More have died in the 20th century by the hand of their own rulers than in war.⁷ What is the wise thing to do? King Solomon doesn't say. Throughout history, most forms of government consolidate power and hope for a sane ruler. The American form divided power and pitted against each other, the rulers in the co-equal branches of government and the co-sovereign States. James Madison, the author of the Constitution explained it this way, "In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."⁸ And here in Chapter 8, King Solomon would agree, that is indeed a great difficulty.

In fact it is not just a great difficulty but also ultimately is a great sorrow because our lives under the sun, subject to the authority of sinful rulers, are but a breath, a breath, a breath.

So we have come to King Solomon to ask 'what do we need to know to be wise'. And he answers with the first paradox about wisdom, that it is good to be wise, but not good enough, for the unpredictable power of human authority will frustrate wisdom.

Other Paradoxes And Therefore the Right Question

Now in the interest of time I'm not going to read the rest of Chapter 8 nor go into this in much detail. You might have to study it on your own yourselves, over lunch today I think would be a good time.

This is Chapter 8 of Ecclesiastes, a statement that wisdom is good and necessary and makes our 'face shine', followed by a series of paradoxes showing just how unsatisfying, frustrating, and lacking wisdom is. King Solomon says it is good to be wise, but the unpredictable power of human authority will frustrate, supersede, confound, and otherwise limit wisdom. He says it is good to be wise, but unanswered injustice has no good explanation and leaves wisdom lacking. He says it is good to be wise, but the fleeting nature of life under the sun, it's sadness, and bitter sweetness, thoroughly robs wisdom of meaning. And he says it is good to be wise, but wisdom under the sun is simply unattainable. To everything he says there is no good answer under the sun.

⁵ PBS - <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/drug-lord/the-staggering-death-toll-of-mexicos-drug-war/>

⁶ Sacramento Bee - <http://www.sacbee.com/opinion/editorials/article5664384.html>.

⁷ Reason - <http://reason.com/blog/2013/03/13/communism-killed-94m-in-20th-century>; 111 million by war, 144 million by genocide/civilwar/ideology - <http://www.informationisbeautiful.net/visualizations/20th-century-death>.

⁸ The Constitution Society - <http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa51.htm>.

So what is the point of coming to the wisest man on earth and listening to his answers to our question 'what do we need to know to be wise'? Why does he frustrate our desire to be wise? I think he more than anyone knows the limitations of wisdom, that our problem isn't knowledge, that answers to life's questions don't reside in knowing more.

I think he is simply being a wise teacher, who knows that our frustration with seeking wisdom just might cause us to throw up our hands at the unsatisfying nature of wisdom and finally ask him this question: What is better than wisdom?

That's the question I think wise King Solomon has wanted us all along to ask. And to that he would say 'Right! What is better than unattainable wisdom?' Ecclesiastes leaves us with that question hanging in the air right to the end to the last two verses, where King Solomon declares:

Eccles 12:13-14 – ¹³ Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: "Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. ¹⁴ For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil."

What is better than wisdom? King Solomon says fearing God and keeping His commandments. Jesus says it this way, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it."⁹ King David says, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want (or lack). He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name sake."¹⁰ And Paul says:

1Cor 1:21 – ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

What is better than wisdom? Obedience is better than wisdom. Knowing the one who calls Himself the Good Shepherd, and obeying His word. And what is the foolish message that saves? It is that the only perfect sinless man, Jesus, God's Son, who out of the great love He has for each of us, no matter who we are or what we've done or what we've left undone, did what we could not do ourselves, dying in our place to make right all of our sins, and rising from the grave to give us life that does not end – the very antithesis of hevel.

I have an illustration of why obedience is better than wisdom, and while most of my illustrations come from the sewage world, and you all will be one day the most knowledgeable congregation about sewage, this illustration is from horses. We've owned two horses, Honey, and Jave. Honey was bad and Jave was good. Honey knew everything a horse needs to know, when to run, when to fight, when to buck off a rider, when to head home, when to bite, when to notice the plastic bag in the brush is mortal threat to life, who to trust, what trails are dangerous, which commands issued by the rider to obey, and which to disobey, for Honey was as wise for a horse under the sun as a horse can be. Honey was

⁹ Luke 11:28

¹⁰ Ps 23:1-3

also awful to ride eventually given away for nothing to a tough guy horse trainer. There may be some hard times down the trail for Honey. And then there was Jave, who also knew everything a horse needs to know, which for him was simply to pay attention to the rider's commands and do as the rider says. An obedient horse is said in the horse training world to 'possess a good mind' and 'a kind eye'. He was a joy to ride. When we sold Jave it was for a king's ransom. And here's the thing about Honey, the wise horse that will never know enough, and Jave, the good horse who trusts that the rider knows enough: Both have to complete the trail ride, but one won't enjoy it, and the other with a kind eye will.



In the practical world, this means knowing the rider, Jesus, listening to Him through prayer and through reading and memorizing His Word, and obeying Him by living with His people, and letting the Holy Spirit 'teach us all things, and bring to our remembrance all things he has said to us'. ... and then enjoying the ride.

John 14:26 – ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I have said to you.

* * *

I'll leave you with this: As we look for meaning and reassurance and answers to the questions of this life, perhaps we aren't asking the right question to the right person. Perhaps when we come to someone wise like King Solomon with our questions, about the way to live, about what's true in life, and about this fleeting life itself that is so bittersweet and hard to accept and come to terms with, perhaps he is saying to us, 'Those questions aren't the right questions. It's not what to do but who to follow. It's not hevel but everlasting. It's not wisdom but faith. And I'm not the right person to ask.' ...

... "Go ask Him."



**I am the way,
the truth, and the
life.**

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Let's pray. Lord Jesus ...