

01-11-25b Ecclesiastes

Let's resume our study now in Ecclesiastes chapter 7, where Solomon in verse 15 says, I have seen everything in the days of my vapor. He says, I've got my little vapor trail streaking across the sky here, but even in my brief life, I've seen everything. What is the context here? Remember verse 14? You've got good days, you've got a day where everything is going according to plan, everybody is playing according to Hoyle, all of the pieces are falling into place just like you would expect.

You look around you and you say, you know, all is right with the world, justice is being done, and so on. In the day of calamity, you've got to look beyond the immediate. You've got to look also at something else.

Corresponding to this calamity, God is working in a manner such that man will not lay hold of anything after it. Man is going to come to that same evil answer. Calamity is designed to bring us up face-to-face with what we saw in chapter 1. It is an evil answer, which God has given the sons of men to be answered with.

Evil in the sense of unsatisfactory. It's misery-inducing. It should cause you to think about the greater realities of the universe.

It should bring you face-to-face with God himself. That there's got to be more than the transient. There's got to be more than that which exists in the light of the sun.

So, there's a purpose for the day of calamity. God is at work in the day of calamity. And he's bringing people to the conclusion that they can't accomplish anything permanent.

They can't lay hold of anything permanent. And this is the lever that God uses to pry men out of their complacency, out of their self-indulgence and their self-satisfaction, and recognize their need for him. God has done this in every dispensation.

It's not unique to the church age. God didn't just start convicting people with the Holy Spirit in this age. God has always, even though we live in a material world, faced us with mortality and with the necessity to be brought into relationship with himself.

Look at this. God is at work in the day of calamity. Whether it's your calamity, somebody else's calamity, God is at work.

You've got to have faith. You've got to look at this. God is pointing our attention in the direction of the impermanence of everything that we do and the permanence of what God does.

And we want to lay hold of his eternal work. So he says in verse 15, I've seen everything in the days of my vapor. There is the righteous perishing in his righteousness, and there is the transgressor lasting or living long in his transgression.

It doesn't say the word for his days is not there. You may see that in italics, depending on which translation you have. But he's enduring or prolonging.

This literally means to lengthen something, to draw it out. And so you keep thinking, when is that dirty bird going to perish? He's a transgressor. Well, in one sense, this is a calamity, right? According to the Hebrew view of the world, according to the Scriptures, the righteous is supposed to prosper and the wicked is supposed to perish.

That's the way things work. And yet, inevitably, you take that view and then you look around and you say, wait a minute. Even in my short life, I see the righteous not doing so well and I see the transgressor.

Here's this obvious malefactor over here and nothing ever seems to happen to him. He's thumbing his nose at God and he's not perishing off the earth. What happened to those absolutes and the black and white things that God spoke of in the law and in His Word, even in the wisdom literature that Solomon himself recorded in the Proverbs? Riches and long life are in the right hand of wisdom and all these benefits accrue to the righteous.

Solomon says, look, I've seen what you've seen. I've seen these things in my days of vapor. Righteous perishing in his righteousness.

The transgressor lasting, living long in his transgression. Well, this is a calamity of sorts. It's a calamity to your spiritual worldview.

And Solomon says, look, keep in mind, think about verse 14, God is at work in this day of calamity. Why would God let the righteous perish? All of us have seen examples of people who just seem to be God's, just a man after God's own heart, die young. I mean, Jim Elliott always comes to my mind.

If you ever read the journals of Jim Elliott, there was a guy who had a deep and intense personal relationship with God. He meditated day and night on the things of God. He was in prayer.

He had a passion. If you want to talk about somebody with a passion for God, read the journals of Jim Elliott. He wasn't writing these for public consumption.

This was his private diaries that he was just writing for himself. You want to see somebody that was just on, just being consumed with a fire for God. He was such a man.

The righteous, and he perished in his righteousness. He's down there trying to help the Auckee Indians and got spared to death. And you see Hugh Hefner.

You see that other guy, Larry Flint, wheeling around in his wheelchair, still alive, a purveyor of all kinds of filth, prospering, happy. Old Hefner is still walking around in his bathrobe, smoking expensive cigarettes and living the high life with nubile young women over at his mansion. And

you think, well, this doesn't seem to match the biblical worldview that the righteous prosper and the wicked get snuffed out.

You go to that passage in Proverbs that says the candle of the wicked will be snuffed out. You say, well, there's no snuffing going on here. Well, that's a calamity.

That can be a calamity to somebody that thinks everything ought to be just so. Solomon says, look, God is at work in this. What would God be up to? Why would God let the righteous perish early? Why would He let the wicked endure in their wickedness? God is at work in each of these situations in different ways.

It takes different means to get to us, to convict us. Some people need a lifetime of misery before they finally face the issue of God. Other people get it right away and they don't need to hang around here being vexed in their righteous soul.

God is at work. The thing we have confidence in is when you look around, don't be troubled. Don't let it turn to anger in your soul because God is at work.

God is at work in each individual life convicting of the truth that is contained in this book of Ecclesiastes. Look, life is short, it is transient, it's a vapor, and you can't carry anything out of it. You don't have the means.

You've got to be given something permanent by God. The Yitron is in the wisdom that leads you to the fear of the Lord, that leads you to relationship with the Lord. It's not found in the obvious places.

It's going to be in the shade. So when you see the day of calamity, look at this. Don't be troubled.

Don't get angry. And also, don't draw false conclusions. Don't abandon righteousness because you see the righteous perishing.

Don't get into wickedness because you see the wicked enduring. Don't become excessively righteous. Don't get into righteousness for its own sake.

Don't say, well, if righteousness is the key, I'm going to be righteous to a fault. Don't make yourself overly wise. Don't puff yourself up with knowledge and miss the point of it.

If you get into imbalance, if you overbalance and make self-righteousness a goal, this is righteousness pushed too far. When you say harbeit, you're saying this is a superabundance. This is over and above.

It's beyond the limit. Don't be righteous beyond the limit. What are you trying to do? You're out of balance.

What is the result of imbalance in righteousness or imbalance in wisdom? You make yourself

desolate. You desolate yourself. A desolate landscape is one that has nothing good in it, nothing permanent in it.

By the same token, verse 17, do not transgress excessively. You look around, you see the transgressor is lasting. You say, well, he's doing it.

He's not so bad off. God hasn't struck him with lightning. And I'd kind of like to do that.

That kind of matches my area of weakness. Nothing bad happened to him, so why don't I just go on into transgression? Or why don't I just engage in the foolishness of the world? These people all seem to be having a good time. He says, no, don't go into excess transgression.

Don't go the opposite direction from wisdom and make yourself a fool. Why should you die in what is not your time? There is a penalty for those who know better. There is a sin unto death.

There is discipline from God. It will shorten your life to abandon what you know to be right. You are accountable for transgression as a believer.

You are accountable for wisdom as a believer. And abandoning those things and going excessively in the wrong direction will shorten your life. It doesn't mean every transgression shortens your life.

But to excess, you go in that direction with impunity. You go beyond the pale. You abandon wisdom.

There are plenty of New Testament passages if we had the time we could go to where it talks about those who, once having tasted of the good word of God and the heavenly gift, if they fall away, worse things happen to them. Peter talks about these who it would have been better for them had they not known than to have known and then gone back like a dog returning to its vomit. You can die in what is not your time.

You will suffer an untimely death. But keep in mind that the life and death that are being spoken of here are also harking into eternal things and into spiritual things. You can snuff out your spiritual life in the sense that you lose any potential for production, any potential for laying hold of that which is eternal.

You can die operationally. You can die in terms of fruitfulness. Why should you die in what is not your time? Verse 18 really sums everything up.

It is good. It is tov, he says in verse 18, that you take hold with respect to this. You've got to seize this.

You've got to grasp this. And also from this, literally it says, from this not cause your hand to rest. It's the hyphal stem of the word for rest.

It's tanakh, which oddly enough sounds like the name for the Old Testament scriptures. They call it the tanakh. But it is in this context, the hyphial of this word that means to rest.

And he says, don't let your hand relax from this. When you grab a hold of this, keep a firm grip. Keep straining your hand to keep a hold of it.

Don't let your hand rest once it has grasped this. So what are we talking about here? Is this a moderately important truth or is this a central and vitally important truth? This is the first thing in six and a half chapters that Solomon has said you can get in your hand and you better not let go of it. And what is it? Don't be troubled in your spirit.

Don't be angry. Don't get distracted looking around you and thinking that calamity has struck. Remember that God is at work in the day of calamity.

This is God's plan. He is convincing people about the theme that we've seen throughout this book, that left to yourself, the laughing in the song of the fools, the sing in the sunshine attitude is going to leave you empty handed at the end of your life or worse. It is good that you take hold in this and also from this, not cause your hand to rest.

Why? And here is the punchline of this entire section. For fearing God comes forth from them all. Why does sometimes the righteous perish in their righteousness? Why does sometimes the transgressors live long in their transgression? God is at work.

And fearing God comes... Now they say both here, but it's not the word both. That's an interpretation. It's hakol.

Hakol means all. It's the same thing we translate in everything. Verse 15, I have seen hakol in the days of my vapor.

I've seen the entirety. Kol means all. Hakol means the all.

The whole thing. The big enchilada. And he says, fearing God comes forth from them all.

Not them both. Them all. Wherever God is at work.

Whatever He is doing. Some people He lets them live a long time and they don't ever seem to be catching on. God is at work.

Other people seem like they have so much potential they could have done such great things for God and they perish in their righteousness. And we get troubled. And some people get angry.

Get angry at God. How could you let this vital young life and this disappear? He says, don't do that. Don't say, why were the old days better than these? All of these things have been building up to this point.

God is at work herding us toward the fear of God. God is at work in all of these things. Fearing God comes forth from them all.

That's God's goal. Because the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The fear of the Lord is how you start to lay hold.

The fear of the Lord is what leads you into the shade where you find the silver. Into the shade where you find the wisdom. You take hold of that that you cannot lose.

God is at work in all of these things, Solomon says. And look at verse 19. It's a great, great statement.

Wisdom, and this is a literal translation, wisdom helps the wise more than ten rulers who are in a city. This word in the Masoretic text, and this is one of the few places where I actually think we need to correct the text as it stands. I've been very careful to give you translations, although I'm tempted sometimes.

I think there's been a little jumbling going on in the Hebrew, but I'm sticking with what we have in the Masoretic text before us. However, here we have strong evidence that the text has suffered just a very slight, it's just one mark difference. But in 4q Qohelet, and anytime you see 4q, somebody says that's K4 of Qumran.

There's a fragment of this book that was found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. And this passage happens to be attested. It's found in some of these fragments.

Also in the Septuagint translation, both in 4q Qohelet and in the Septuagint, the version of this verse, instead of a verb that means to strengthen or to make strong, you have, there's a resh instead of, the word to strengthen is azaz, A-Z-A-Z, but to help is azor, A-Z-A-Y-O-R. Remember Hatzor, Azor, has the idea, Etzer comes from this, stone of help, Ebenezer, here I raise my Ebenezer, stone of help. Well, the resh is attested in the Septuagint and in 4q Qohelet.

And I think that that is the better reading here because he's not talking about wisdom strengthening the wise. Strengthening for what? What does he need strength for? And in what sense do rulers strengthen a city? But when you think of help, this flows right along with what Solomon is saying. Wisdom helps the wise.

It aids the wise. It is a benefit to them, more than 10 rulers who are in a city. What city do you suppose is being talked of here? What's the one city that's been mentioned in this book? Jerusalem.

Well, if you wanted to get your land rezoned in Israel so that you could open up a bread shop or something, wouldn't it be great if 10 of the rulers of the city were on your side? They're all sitting on the city council and you say, I'd like a permit to open up my bakery here so I can bake bread in this particular area of Jerusalem. Wisdom helps the wise. More than 10 rulers who are in a city,

or more than 10 rulers help a city.

You could have 10 men and they're all working for the benefit of the city, but if you've got wisdom, you're better off than the city is with these 10 wise rulers. Wisdom helps the wise. Take hold of this.

Don't let your hand rest from it. Do not let it go. Fearing God comes forth from all of these things.

And wisdom will help you see this. Wisdom will give you calm in the day of calamity. You look around and you say, there are things going on that just don't make sense to me.

I don't understand why it seems that the wicked prosper. I don't understand why it seems that the righteous perish. I don't understand why it seems that the righteous man fails from off the earth.

Fools proliferate and the wise diminish. It troubles me and that troubled soul is a place for anger to come to rest. Solomon says, don't let it take root.

Don't let it take hold. God is at work. God is manipulating circumstances.

He's bringing people face to face with things. He's leading the wise into the house of mourning where their distressed face will make their heart better. All of these things are for the fear of the Lord.

Fearing God comes forth from them all. And the wisdom that abides in the fear of the Lord helps the wise more than ten rulers in a city. This is leading up to a very tricky verse that we'll leave for next time.

In verse 20, he says, A man is not righteous in the earth, or it may say in the standard translations, there is not a righteous man in the earth that will do good and not sin. And then it talks about not taking to heart words that you hear spoken because you're liable to hear your servant cursing you. We'll get into the details of that next time.

But look at the context and look at the point. Solomon says, you Israelites, I've called you together here. I'm trying to point you in the direction of that which lasts beyond the setting of the sun.

You've heard the law. You've heard some of the Psalms and some of the Proverbs. And you have a certain worldview as a result.

Just remember, God is at work. The fear of the Lord is what we're after in the daily exigencies of life. If you let yourself get distracted, if you rationalize, if you lose sight of the eternal, the silver that is found in the shade, if you get distracted looking at something else, you're going to miss it, and you're going to wind up with days of vapor instead of good that is beautiful.

It's a great exhortation. It's a great reminder, even these 3,000 years later, that each and every day that we have, even if it seems like it's a day of calamity, God is at work for our good and the distress of our face can make us wise. It can yield the eternal fruit of righteousness.

Well, let's close here with a word of prayer. Father, we do thank you for your patience and your faithfulness toward us. You sustain us in this life.

You bring us into all different kinds of circumstances, all of which are designed to cultivate in us a healthy appreciation for you, a spirit of obedience, a passion for the knowledge and the wisdom that leads to reflecting your glory. We pray that we will be brought up short when we need it, that God the Holy Spirit can minister these things to our souls in such a way that we will reflect the glory of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray it in His name.

Amen.