

"Doctor My Eyes"
Ecclesiastes 7:13-8:9

Intro: "Doctor My Eyes" by Jackson Browne

*Doctor, my eyes have seen the years
And the slow parade of fears without crying
Now I want to understand
I have done all that I could
To see the evil and the good without hiding
You must help me if you can
Doctor, my eyes
Tell me what is wrong
Was I unwise to leave them open for so long
'Cause I have wandered through this world
And as each moment has unfurled
I've been waiting to awaken from these dreams
People go just where they will
I never noticed them until I got this feeling
That it's later than it seems
Doctor, my eyes
Tell me what you see
I hear their cries
Just say if it's too late for me
Doctor, my eyes
Cannot see the sky
Is this the prize
For having learned how not to cry¹*

This is one of my favorite songs by Jackson Browne. His little poem is set to a catchy tune but when you consider the words more carefully you realize it is a lament. Jackson Browne begins by saying, "*Doctor, my eyes have seen the years and the slow parade of fears without crying.*" He sounds like Solomon when he says, "*In my vain life I have seen everything.*" Both Solomon and Jackson Browne lament they have seen so many evil things in the world. However, Jackson Browne became a cynic about life. He says he hears the cries of suffering people but he no longer cares so he asks at the very end, "*Is this the prize for having learned how not to cry?*"

Honestly seeing all the evil in the world today is maddening. I hear the stories coming out of the UK of how, about a year ago, the government kept the parents from getting medical treatment for their baby boy, Charlie Gard, and now the parents of Alfie Evans are denied the right to leave the country and seek medical treatment for him. This is madness. In Syria, the President of

¹ Songwriter: Jackson Browne, Doctor My Eyes lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group, release date: 1972.

the country gasses his own citizens. We look around our own country and the culture of death reigns and our political system seems broken, a person can become cynical.

Yet it is not simply the larger culture that feeds into our tendency to be cynical. As we saw in Ecclesiastes 5, foolishness and unrighteousness reside in the church. We offend and wound one another. We are selfish and demanding. Even church leadership is not exempt. When unrighteousness and injustice arrive in our own church we can become cynical about church, about life and even about God.

Although Jackson Browne became a cynic when he looked at life; Solomon did not. Solomon saw the unrighteousness, injustice, and foolishness in the larger culture and in the house of God but he did not become cynical about life under the sun nor did he become cynical about God.

This morning we are going to work through Ecclesiastes 7:13-8:17. This passage sounds more like typical proverbs. Hence the main point: *In Christ, God gives us practical wisdom and practical theology for enjoying life under the sun.*

Solomon continues to dispense wisdom by cycling through topics in his sermon. This is a typical Hebrew way of teaching. In each cycle it seems he nuances his teaching just a bit to help us get wisdom. He helps us see the topics from many angles. He is like the Replay Official at an NFL game. You see the play and there is a question and then you look at the play from about 6-8 different angles to make sure you get the call correct.

So as we work straight through the book, we are learning the wisdom of Ecclesiastes like the Hebrews did. We are just plowing through the text verse-by-verse. We lose something when we westernize the approach to the book and group the topics of the book together. The repetitiveness of the sermon means we chew on, digest, and eat again the wisdom of the book. Solomon sort of takes our noses and rubs them into the wisdom of this book over and over. This approach is good for us because we are slow learners.

Three points:

Practical Atheism

Practical Theology

Practical, Godly, Wisdom in a Secular Culture

1. Practical Atheism (Ecclesiastes 7:13-18)

- Verse 13: *"Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?"*
- *"Consider"* means to see, to inspect and pay attention, to think about it deeply. The Preacher wants us to see the work of God in this fallen world. God is sovereign, He orders all things but do we see it? Do we accept it? Our tendency in our fallen condition is to only consider the work of fallen man in a fallen world.

If we do not slow down to consider the work God we become practical atheists. We must learn to pay attention and turn our meditations to God's work and to see His hand of providence in all things.

- Verse 14: *"In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him."*
- So in the day of prosperity—see it as God's gift and enjoy it. Don't take credit for your wisdom but instead, give thanks to God and rejoice! Look for the hand of God even in the small insignificant things and rejoice.

Yet, he keeps going, look in v. 14. There is the word *consider* again. He wants us to know that in this life under the sun it may be easy to give God credit for the good things but then forget His hand in our adversity. I really like how Zack Eswine

helps us think about considering God in the day of adversity. He says, *"Let the tough stuff sink in. Don't run from it. Don't use god-talk to pretend it doesn't exist. Set your heart and mind on the awful things. No evil thing can ultimately win. The foulest thing will reveal something true about the nature of life and the nobler purposes we were made for. Take time, lots of time, the time needed to grieve, ask questions, wrestle with it, work it out, and come to terms."*²

It is easy to give God credit for the good things in life but then when the day of adversity comes blame Him for our problems. Job's wife thought that way. After the day of adversity hit her family, she told Job to curse God and die. Job responded, *"You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?"*

We struggle with the mystery that surrounds hard things in our lives, don't we? It takes genuine Christian faith and wisdom to see how God works in a fallen world. God does what He does and who can say, *"Why have you done this?"* Honestly . . . you can say that to God and He will listen to your question and heart-felt lament. But when you ask that question, do you continue to rest in Christ even when the tough stuff is still a mystery?

The truth is we will never be able to figure out everything God is doing. He does not intend for us to figure it out. So we should focus on what we know. God holds it all in His hands, the good and the bad, so trust Him. Trust that someone larger than our prosperity and someone larger than our adversity holds our lives. Our future is hidden within His *secret will* so we must trust Him.

- Verse 15-18: *"In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?"*¹⁷ *Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?"*¹⁸ *It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them."*
- On the heels of vv. 13-14, the Preacher hits us with proverbs that sound like a conundrum. In v. 15 he is continuing to unpack how the sovereignty of God impacts all of life. Basically, Solomon is saying that there is no secret formula to life. Let's take a little time and think through these verses.

American pop-theology (Prosperity Gospel) says there are good rewards for those who are good and have enough faith but for those who are wicked there are no rewards. The problem is there are injustices in the world. The wicked prosper and the righteous suffer.

So what should we do? First, we should lighten up and relax our grip on life. We cannot control everything. Second, don't try to bargain with God based on your behavior. God is not the host of *Let's Make a Deal*.

- Look in vv. 16-18: It sounds like Solomon becomes a cynic and talks about both sides of his mouth. But really he showing us that if we are not careful we will become the cynic. A person might conclude since they cannot control everything, *"What's the point?"*
 - Look in v. 16: The righteousness he warns of in v. 16 is not a healthy righteousness. Instead, it is an *overly strained righteousness* that pursues righteousness as a reward and is a way of manipulating God. It is a conceited righteousness that sucks the life out of a person.
 - Then in v. 17, it seems like he is saying, *"what's the point?"* Think about it. If an *overly strained righteousness* ends in death then you might conclude that there is no advantage of being righteous so I might as well be wicked. The problem is that this most certainly ends in death. Neither approach leads to life so what should we do?

² Zack Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, series: *The Gospel According to the Old Testament*, 188-189.

- Verse 18: Verse 18 pulls the wisdom of these proverbs together. Be careful to not draw false conclusions with these verses. Some think Solomon is advocating half-heartedness, *"don't be too good or too bad."* Others conclude Solomon is saying it is *okay to be a little bad and a little good*. Neither of these conclusions are what he is advocating. REMEMBER it is the person who fears God that shall come through it all.

Solomon gently teaches us in these verses about our tendency toward practical atheism. He shows us HOW we try to control life and live as if God does not exist. Here is what we do: *We try to be good and it does not give us the results we want so we will just give in to our corrupt nature and then that wrecks our lives.* Finally, we say, *"What's the use?"*

This has been going on since Adam and Eve left Eden and now Solomon is leading us back to Eden where we live in the continual presence of God. As Zack Eswine says, *"Life under the sun is a God-inhabited life."*

What we need is a practical theology to keep us from being practical atheists.

- Practical Theology (Ecclesiastes 7:19-8:1)
- The Practical Theology: (Ecclesiastes 7:19): Wisdom from God is for God's glory and man's good
- The Problem:
 - Man is a sinner and his heart is wicked (Ecclesiastes 7:20-24)
 - Men and women are sinners who want to be wise but instead, they are exceedingly wicked (Ecclesiastes 7:25-29)
 - Verse 25: It sounds like Solomon is giving us his testimony.
 - Verses 26-28 sound chauvinistic but this is not what he means. He is still illustrating mankind's sinfulness and foolishness.
 - Verse 29: He is now drawing toward his conclusion. This was not the way God created men and women. But now everyone falls short. Everyone is a sinner including himself. He may be the king and he may be wise but he is a fool and he has sought out many schemes just like everyone else.
- The Good news: (Ecclesiastes 8:1): The practical theology is that all people are sinners but God's wisdom sovereignly changes the hard hearts of people for His glory. The *"face shining"* is the reflection of the glory of God working in a man's life. It is a reference to Moses spending time with God in the tent and when he came out his face glowed with the reflection of God's glory. Moses' countenance was changed from being in God's presence and God gave him wisdom to lead the people of Israel. Wisdom from God is practical theology.
- 2. Practical, Godly, Wisdom in a Secular Culture (Ecclesiastes 8:2-17)
- Solomon did not live in a secular culture but there were many in his day that lived as practical-atheists. They lived as if God would never hold them accountable for all they had done to their fellow man. It is in this culture that Solomon begins to walk through practical, godly wisdom for living in a culture that does not act as if God is real.
- Verses 2-7: We need a wise, godly submission to authority
 - Verses 2-4: When you are dealing with the king you need to be wise because the king has authority over you. The Apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 13 to be submissive to those in the governing authority over us because God has put them in those places. We may not approve of how they govern. You may not have voted for them but God will hold them accountable for the discharge of their office so trust God to do His job.

- Verses 5-7: Next Solomon calls us to keep the laws of the land. Be wise and keep the commands (laws). Use wisdom and do what is right for this is the wise way to respond to authority. He said in v. 3 *don't go hasty from the king's presence* so in other words from the wise heart cheerfully comply with the laws.

Grudging obedience is never the way to comply with the law: [I guess I have to drive the speed limit, I guess I can't punch my coworker for being stupid] Now I am illustrating with a humor the problem of the heart. You see instead of loving the limits of the law we really want to break them, don't we?

There is a just way to live and we struggle with it. We don't naturally love our neighbors. We don't naturally seek to help our neighbor lift his heavy load in life and often we feel overlooked because no one will help us. Verse 7 echoes v. 1 and the answer is only God knows so live a just life according to the law. Not simply the law of the land but wisdom says live according to God's laws or we say the gospel. Wisdom says to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor in the same way you love yourself. This is practical theology and wisdom in a secular culture.

- Verses 8-10: We need to remember God has put limitations on evil and human authority

Verses 8-9: You cannot control the day of your death. You may live through the war or not. Only God controls that. Men harm one another but only God has the right to say when a person dies.

Verse 10: He concludes this little exercise on authority about the limits of human authority. He says good leaders and evil leaders both live within the limits of God's timetable on their lives. Just like no man can hold back the tide of the ocean likewise the tide of time will come in and his authority will be washed out with the tide.

It is a blessed thing that God limits evil leaders. They cannot rule forever. It may not change in your lifetime or even a couple of hundred years but it will change.

The sad thing about wicked leaders is that they will be buried with a grand funeral, holidays will be given in their honor, they will be celebrated, and their faces may be minted on coins, and printed on currency. However, that will fade with time and their names will be forgotten. This is the judgment of God. They may live as atheists or even practical atheist but eventually, they will learn they are not the True King and the Ultimate Judge when they stand before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Then they will see the vanity of their lives before the glorious, eternal King. So how shall we live in this secular culture?

- Verses 11-17: We should enjoy God's good, ordinary gifts. [Solomon is wrapping up this cycle of wisdom]

- Verses 11-13: Solomon is saying that even though the wicked prosper he is confident it will NOT go well for them. Verse 11 is saying that they look at their lives and realize that justice is not given and so they conclude that God does not see them or He does not exist. But the truth is that God does see and while they sin one hundred times over and over and live a nice long life—God sees. He knows. It will not go well for the sinner but for the one who fears God—it will go well. We are now beginning to hear Solomon drive home in the conclusion of Ecclesiastes 12.

We must be careful here because Solomon does not doubt God. He is not a cynic. He knows God is the final Judge for in v. 13 we see the final state of the practical atheist. It will not go well for him. It may have gone well for him in life but in death, God will hold him accountable.

Jesus picks up on this kind of understanding of judgment in Luke 16:19-25 when He tells the story of the beggar Lazarus who ate the scraps from the rich man's table. Then both men died and the rich man went to Hell and

burned in torment but Lazarus feared God and he went to heaven. The rich man saw Lazarus comforted in heaven in the presence of God and asked Father Abraham to send Lazarus to serve him in Hell by dipping and giving him some water to cool his torment. Even in Hell, the rich man did not get it. He still wanted Lazarus to serve him.

- Verses 14-15: What is Solomon saying in these two verses? Bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people so . . . instead of being a cynic or a practical atheist . . . be joyful.

Solomon reminds us of Job's struggles in these verses. He wants to make sure we get this message. He is not hoping we respond by saying, *"whatever will be will be."* This is a *"stoic cynicism"*.

He wants us to respond by trusting God. So . . . when we see the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper our hearts ought to break. We should begin to pray for the righteous to endure and that the wicked come to faith in Christ.

Verse 15 keeps us from jumping off the cliff of gloom and doom and calls us back to God's original good gifts He gave us in creation. Verse 15 calls us to recover Eden. According to v. 15, what else are we to do? First I said we are to look to God, trust God and pray and second we are to seek our joy in Him. We rejoice with those who prosper and grieve with those who are suffering for life under the sun is hard BUT [as the rest of v. 15 says] we seek our joy in God. We still come back to enjoying life under the sun in God. We enjoy the food, drink, and work He has given us.

- Verses 16-17: In vv. 16-17 we have more testimony from Solomon. He is saying, *"Hey I have looked all of the busyness of man under the sun and you know what? It is vanity. You work your fingers to the bone and what do you get—boney fingers. That is all. You lose lots of precious sleep and for what? You cannot make one hair on your head black, white or gray; you cannot even make them stay on your head. So quit trying to be God."*

He is not saying don't try to make good decisions BUT he is saying stop trying to do God's job. Stop trying to figure out every minutia of detail when it comes to life under the sun because you cannot know all that God is going to do. As Gandalf said in Lord of the Rings, *"Even the very wise cannot know all ends."*

Conclusion

How do you know if you are a practical atheist? To keep from being a practical atheist and cynic we must go back to God's word. So what is striking about how Ecclesiastes 8 ends is this emphasis on how it is impossible for us to figure everything out. Look in v. 17, Solomon uses the same Hebrew word three-times to emphasize that no one can *"find out"* what God is doing in history. As Winston Churchill said it is a *"mystery wrapped in a riddle inside an enigma."*

Let's face it, we will suffer in this world, we will witness tragedies and some of those things will happen to us. So much of our lives are lived in the dark and we just do not know why God is allowing things to come in our lives. We want answers but we often do not get them. Zack Eswine says, *"Learning how to do life means learning how to deal with ignorance. Not ignorance in the sense of being stupid but in the sense of not knowing how things will work out."*

What are we to do? We have been given the gift of enjoying God. Sure we may not be able to figure everything out but we can enjoy God. So relax, stop trying to do God's job and enjoy life, enjoy the ordinary gifts He has given you. The Apostle Paul urged the Thessalonians to *"aspire to live quietly, and to mind their own affairs, and to work with their hands."* Likewise, he instructed the church in 1 Timothy 2:1-2, *"First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way."*

How can we live like this and why should we? It is because, at the darkest moment in history, Christ stepped out of Heaven and came to set the captives free from the penalty and power of sin. He lived the life we should have lived and died the death on the

cross that we should have died. Then He was buried but His disciples and followers thought it was all over. It was the darkest day for them. They forgot Jesus said He would rise on the third day. They forgot Sunday was coming. They did not understand the plan of God although it had been told them. Then on the third day, Christ rose from the dead and defeated death and Hell. He calls His people to Himself. He calls them to return to Eden by trusting in Him by enjoying the food and drink and toil He has given us in our lives under the sun.

To live life under the sun in this way is an act of faith. We eat, drink and do the work He has called us to do for He has made us alive in Christ so let's let Christ doctor our eyes so that we see the brokenness and we weep with those who weep and we rejoice with those who rejoice and even in all of the pain and suffering life under the sun is still to be celebrated.