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Ecclesiastes 9:11-18

"Wisdom Wins Out In The End"

May 5, 2013

Shall we open our Bibles to Ecclesiastes 9:11, as we continue with Solomon's quest to find life in the world apart from the Lord and yet come back to that thing that he knew all along - that God was his God, and He would take care of him, and His ways brought life.

Life certainly is frustrating, isn't it, when it's out of your control? And I thought about that this week. We were stuck in Israel for a week, waiting for a group because ElAl, our Israeli airline, went on strike the day we were destined to leave. Of course that day, and so our group got there Friday instead of Tuesday, and then we had to move every reservation, and every reservation time, and every hotel room, and every luncheon and dinner, and it was ridiculous. And it worked out. And I remember sitting in Israel for a week with my wife saying, "Lord, why are we here?" And He didn't tell me. So if you know, let me know - because He's not saying anything.

I'll tell you what. Even for us, as God's people, the only comfort we have in the unpredictability of life is knowing that God's in charge. He doesn't always give answers, and I think that we, as God's people, need obviously to be encouraged not to make determinations about what God is up to based solely on what we see. We have to sometimes just sit back and let God be God, knowing who He is and that He works all things together for good.

I like driving. I don't mean just driving. I mean I don't like others to drive. And I think it's because when I'm driving, I feel like I'm in charge. I decide where we're going, what route we're taking, how fast we're moving, what songs we're listening to, what the climate is like. I'm in charge in that seat. When you drive, I'm not in charge of any of those things. You decide where to turn, you decide how fast you're going, you decide what the weather's going to be like in the car. And then I find myself, as a back seat driver, very good at that - turn it down, turn the station, it's too hot in here, you missed the turn. We like being in charge, don't we? If you've ever had a cab ride in Paris or in Moscow or in New York, it gives new meaning to your life being in someone else's hands. I remember Jerry Seinfeld used to have a joke that said of New York cab drivers, "Well, I comfort myself with the knowledge of the fact that he is a professional." But that's not enough

comfort. Much of our life is like that, though. It is unpredictable. It is out of our control. And unfortunately, even when we come to know the Lord, we sometimes bring that understanding that we had in the world to our relationship with God. And so we say to the Lord, "Lord, I've given you my life. What are you doing?! What are you doing with it?"

I heard a story of two men, a preacher and a meteorologist, going to play golf. Middle of the summer, freak rain storm forced both of them to take cover, and they stood for an hour - looking up at the rain, just pouring down, and the preacher said to the meteorologist, "You know, between the two of us, we ought to have either seen this thing coming or be able to pray it away." But neither one of them could. That's the way life is. That's the rub. No matter who you are or who you know, life is uncertain. It is, in the world, a terrible place to deal with. And in the Lord, we want to find that rest that we know that He's in charge.

We long for a level of certainty in life that we can take some rest in. Much of our life's activity is driven by the desire for certainty. We go to the gym to stay healthy because we don't want to die prematurely. We work hard and save and invest so that we can secure our financial future. We send our kids to the right college to be certain they can have a better life than ours. We try to create right environments so that those around us will be blessed. But even if you have all of your ducks in a row, even if you've done it all right, there is no guarantee that the future will be as you hope that it might. And you really don't get much of a stability or predictability with life at all. Not in the world. It is not enough. Life is unpredictable. But, you know, even the unpredictability of your life is evidence of the goodness of God because He allows it to be so. For you and me, as believers in Him, knowing God and knowing that we don't know the future creates a real sense of adventure. We are forced to really look to Him every day. He knows the future, we don't, so we're pushed in His direction constantly because of the fact that we don't know what's coming. If you saw all the good that was coming your way, I think you'd just kick back and do nothing. You would degenerate, wouldn't you? If you saw all of the trials that you were going to have to face, you might just give up. But God doesn't work that way. You aren't paralyzed by fear or overcome with anticipation because you know Him. So God raises the curtain on today, and when He sees you through it, then He raises the curtain on tomorrow. That's the way He works. That's His plan. You don't know the future, but you know the One who does. And the only certainty and guarantee that you have for life is,

as you come to rest in Him knowing He has approved of it before time and it has passed through His hands, this is what He has deemed appropriate for your life.

James said it in chapter 4:13-15, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit;' whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.' " I mean, it is ultimately the Christian's response to the uncertainty of life - God knows, and I'm gonna walk with Him. And what He knows and what He allows is for my good.

In our verses this morning, Solomon makes that observation about the world - that we have no control of our future, but we know the One who does. He adds a second point later on, beginning there in verse 13, to tell us that the world's view of God's work and God's will is very different than is ours. They don't see it, but you do. And he concludes by saying that wisdom - God's wisdom, God's ways, having God's heart in things - is the best and only way to live. It is what will secure you day in and day out in this very uncertain world.

Verse 11, "I returned" Solomon said "and saw under the sun" (That's his favorite word, isn't it? It means the life that is horizontal, right? It is the one that you can observe in life, apart from God. The one that he can see, and everyone else can see. I saw "under the sun." And what did he conclude?) "that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favor to men of skill; but time and chance happens to them all." The only thing predictable about life is that it's going to be unpredictable. It's like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get. But notice the poetic and clear considerations that Solomon writes down because what he says is, great ability when added to unpredictability never guarantees great success. And he gives us five illustrations - in athletics, in military battles, in industry, in the economy, and even in individual proficiency - to say the same thing. Look, generally the fastest runner will win the race. Normal. He was the fastest - he won. But that isn't always true, is it? You can't make that a rule because we've seen, and you've seen, plenty of times - the fellow who runs too fast at the beginning and runs out of gas at the end and gets overwhelmed by the tortoise who's just been able to pace himself all that well. Or the fellow who twists his ankle in the final stretch, and he falls to the ground in pain. Or he hits the last hurdle, and it throws him off stride enough, and he's caught. The fast don't always win. That's

Solomon's point. Look, why? Time and chance happen to all of them. In the world, you can't make rules that are consistent in that regard. Lance Armstrong showed us the race isn't to the swift. It should be to the honest. He was the fastest, but he was a crook. He cheated. We cheered him on for years, but in the end, in the long run, things were not at all what they seemed. In battles, generally the best-equipped and best-trained army wins the battle; but not always. We just returned from Israel where they, in 1973, fought the Yom Kippur War where, on the holiest day in the Jewish calendar when no one goes to work and there's no one that drives a car and no one that leaves their home, they were attacked both in the North and in the South, with a tremendous force - hoping to take advantage of their religious Sabbath, if you will, the holiest day of the year. And it looked like they were going to be overwhelmed, but they weren't, and though they were the smallest, they were victors. Generally, the smartest and most able people get the best-paying jobs. But not always. Bill Gates is a billionaire. Mark Zuckerberg, the fellow who owns Facebook or much of it, billionaire. The late Steve Jobs, Apple guy, billionaire. All of them - college dropouts. It doesn't always work. "I've gotta get my education, I gotta get my masters, my PhD, my doctorate. I'll make some xxxxx." Well, it usually works but not always. Sometimes gifted and talented and extremely educated people fail miserably. Most often, the bread does go to the wise. But not always because there are just certain things that are absolutely out of your control, and you have to say to yourself, "What in the world is going on here?" And Solomon looks out into the world, apart from even a view of God, and he says, "This is what I see in the world under the sun." Suffice it to say Solomon is having us consider that nothing is guaranteed, nothing is assured, there is no "slam dunk" or predictability. A fast runner winning the race, a strong army winning the battle, bread or prosperity going to the wise, riches to those with great worldly understanding or even favor, as he writes, to those of great skill. Usually true but not always.

Every yearbook has someone voted "Most Likely to Succeed." Oftentimes, they don't. And Solomon mentions a couple of mitigating factors that make life uncertain. He writes it here, "Time and chance happen to everyone." That's his understanding of the world. Experience and misfortune come into every life. Now, for you and me as believers, God uses them to steer us clear of where He doesn't want us to be and to direct our paths because we're His children. He's our God. He's promised to never leave us, to lead us, to guide us, to have a light for our feet. For the world, those unpredictabilities are all designed by God according to His Word, to draw men to Himself - to get folks to run to the end of themselves and

say, "I give up, God. You have Your way. I give You my life." It's the pressure of that that God uses in the world to bring men to Himself. But to you and me, which seems so often to be the same pressure, God has another purpose. He uses it to guide our lives, to direct our paths. We look with Solomon at life "under the sun," and we see a person with talent and ability and resources and skill and opportunity, and we say, "Man, now that person is going places. His possibilities are endless. He can write his own ticket. He will never fail." And yet he does.

"For man also does not know," Solomon writes in verse 12, "his time: like fish taken in a cruel net, like birds caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them." That's the worldly outlook now. Notice verse 11, "under the sun." In the world, the outlook is one of blindness. People are not aware of the evil around them. They judge as a world judges, and one day, their assumptions fail, and their judgment falls quickly and suddenly and permanently. Have you heard the weird dictums by which people live? "Oh, it all's gonna work out. Whatever should be, should be." It's true for you if you give your life to the Lord but hardly true for those who fight Him and oppose Him and resist Him. The way of the wicked is difficult, the Bible says. They're like the churning of the seas. There's never a place of rest for them. "Oh, whatever shall be, will be. I'll count my lucky stars. I got a good break. Boy, we've been fortunate. Knock on wood." Man's not aware of the fact that he's living in an evil time, and it'll catch him like a fish gets caught in a net unaware, or a bird gets taken into a snare. We all know somebody, I suspect, who was riding high at the top of their game, when something unexpected happened to them. An athlete who shows tremendous promise, and everyone wants to draft him, and in his final high school game, his heart gives out, and he dies. Or the fellow who is so wise in his financial ways, and his investments are solid, and his money is sure, and then you find a collapse, and the investor is left penniless. Or the fellow who's relied on his job all of his life, and now it's no longer available, but he is. Solomon uses beautiful poetic language to drive home his point. He highlights the surprise found by those who thought they had life by the tail when suddenly it turned against them. No fish swims around going, "I hope I get caught in a net." No bird is looking to be caught in a snare. Sudden changes in fortune, unexpected turns of events, adventures that go south, or wheels that come off. Who could have foreseen it? How vital, then, that you and I know God - because the rain will fall on the just and the unjust. It is our relationship with Him and our knowledge of Him and our rest in Him that makes a difference from us and those who don't know Him, who try to spend their times explaining life in their own terms.

I heard a man once say, "Two things I have learned. There is a God, and I'm not Him." Those are two pretty good lessons. "There is no wisdom or understanding or counsel against the LORD. The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but deliverance is from the LORD" (Proverbs 21:30-31). That's the distinction. Plan all you like, assume all things go well, but know that God speaks last, and God speaks loudest.

The nice thing about being saved is my life is no longer a matter of coincidence but a matter of providence. I am not a float in the world just suffering like everyone else, but never being brought to my knees. I am, rather, like us, a people who have surrendered to the Lord and realize that behind our life is a Master Designer or an Ultimate Engineer. Providence. Providence, by definition, means that there is an overruling hand of God upon human affairs - that God will have His way. Can I connect the dots and understand it? Absolutely not. Anymore than as a five-year old I understood my dad trying to tell my mom about filing their taxes. I knew the number five. It's about all I got. Same thing with God. When you look back at your life, you can often see the supernatural hand of God and how He worked. But looking forward, it is oftentimes hard to see. I'm amazed at the way people will say, "Oh, you know how I met my wife?" And they'll begin to tell me how the Lord brought them together - ridiculously. How is that possible? And yet it was - there at the right time, made the right phone call, got the job at the place that you needed, happened to run into so-in-so, was just in the office when they needed someone. And oh, how God works - the supernatural work of God in a very natural sense to accomplish His purpose in my life.

Now Solomon's view of life without God is unpredictable. You read of people who lose their children, or are suffering with disease, or are born in very poor areas, have a very difficult time, and you say, "I'm glad that's not me!" How do you know that couldn't have been you? You just luckier? Are you more blessed? Are you more special? Are you set apart? No! God has a heart for every man. He wants all to be saved. He'll determine where He puts you so that He might accomplish His will with you. But the only peace in all of that is to surrender to Him. You look at life apart from God, and you say unpredictable. You look at life with God's eyes and with His Word, and you say providential, purposeful. God's ways, behind the scenes, because He moves all the scenes in which He's behind. There is an unpredictability of horizontal living, but the peace is God's in charge of my life, isn't He? And yours. So, come what may, it hasn't escaped His sight. Come what may, it hasn't escaped His influence, His concern, His plan. Solomon looks at the

world and says, "You know, it doesn't always work out the way it's supposed to. And people aren't aware of the fact that there's harm in every direction. But oh, how God has life."

Compare verse 11 "under the sun" and "time and chance happen to everyone, the sons of men are snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them." But to the saints who are in love with God, His providence is comforting, and it's exciting, and it should bring rest to our souls, not fear.

Solomon goes on, and he adds (verse 13), "This wisdom I have also seen 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, besieged it, and built great snares around it. Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that same poor man." Solomon goes on to say that unlikely heroes in the world today are folks who speak wisdom or who are wise in the Lord won't get much credit here, won't be really honored here, don't really get a place here - in the view of the world. Notice the picture here. This man lives in a little city in Israel. There aren't very many people in it. It has a wall around it, though it seems needless because everything and everyone there is poor and weak. Yet one day, they awake to the sound of horses' hooves and military might, and one look over the wall and just everyone knows in town, "This is it. Got no place to run, no place to hide. We have had it. Life is short, and our death is certain. There is no way out." And yet, out of that little city with just few people - few men in it - comes a poor wise man. By Solomon's own definition, the wise are those who walk with God and listen to God and know God and seek Him. And this poor wise man rises to the occasion, and, through diplomacy and some unknown application of wisdom, he delivers this small town from a very big enemy. It is a huge accomplishment, and yet according to verse 15, the irony of the lesson is no one remembers this hero for very long. "He saves our lives. He pulls us out of certain destruction." You would think he'd be the fellow who'd have a statue at the center of the square. But no. "Thanks for that!" Move on. The underdog who comes when the bully threatens him is saved by a poor weak man who is wise, and yet when deliverance comes, no one remembers his name. Why? Because he's poor and because he's weak and because he's wise.

The world is still most impressed with the great king and the big army - the ones who are able to ensnare and capture a weak city. The world sees might as honored. Not wisdom, but might. The world rarely honors real heroes. We exalt movie stars

and sports players and music artists who become extremely wealthy as the world flocks after them. I tried to get tickets to go see the Stones until I found out they were \$600, and I remembered Mick Jagger is 70 years old. (Laughing) But he can get \$600 from 20,000 people a night. Not bad because that's the way the world works. We don't usually honor the doctor or the teacher or the good parent or the great-grandparent or the blocker on the line who makes the quarterback look good. He's usually forgotten. No one remembers him or remembers his name for long because that's not what the world is into anymore than the world really cares that you are wise and walking with God. The songwriter is usually less honored than the singer. The actor gets far more credit than the screenwriter. It's just the way it is. We do it in the church. Pastors get applauded, worship leaders get mentioned, Christian singers and artists get room, but the Sunday school teacher and the janitor and the administrator - who cares? We should all care, but that's not the way the world works. It's the way the people of God should work but not the world. I'm sure all of you have heard of Dwight Moody, but you should know that if it were not for the great boldness of a man named Edward Kimball who walked into a shoe store - Holton's in Chicago - and shared with a young D.L. Moody, who was selling shoes, that Jesus was Lord, Moody might never have been. Everybody knows Moody's name. Nobody knows Kimball's name unless you happened to be interested in Moody's life, and you went to read a book about him.

Paul, when he wrote to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 12:18-25 says, "God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you;' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor.....but God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another." Look, every one of you is interested in how you look. Your face has to look good when you go out. You'll buy stuff that costs hundreds of dollars to put on your face so you can look good when you go out. Same thing with clothes. Look, your face cannot look so good, and you'll be fine. Your heart gives out, that's another story. Never saw your heart, have you? Pretty dependable thing though. Need that. Your lungs, your liver. Nobody goes, "Hey, great liver." (Laughing) Till you need one. Anonymous doesn't mean unnecessary.

Notice that the most important man in this story that Solomon tells, for this city, was a poor unknown man who was forgotten, but in his wisdom brought deliverance. Quiet heroes keep the work of God alive in the world because the world finds value in all the wrong places. So you may not be appreciated, but that doesn't mean your work shouldn't continue - sharing with your family, reaching out to your friends, those that you work with. You might feel unapplauded and unknown and undervalued, but God knows. It's just the world's assessment. God's different. Give me a teacher over a quarterback, and a doctor over a rapper. Maybe that one's too obvious. (Laughing) And a faithful saint who will pray for the body in which he is over the popular evangelist who can draw thousands. Solomon's lesson is pretty stark. Wisdom, the kind that brings deliverance to many, may very well be set aside by the opinions and the applause and the majority outlook of those in the world. They look for honor and might and power and money and success and popularity. God doesn't. It's just not the way it works. It is unpredictable, and it is clearly defined. We rejoice in the saint who shares God's Word and God's love, who preaches the gospel - the insignificant hero who walks with God day by day. Because the race isn't to the **strong**, and the battle isn't to the strong or to the fast or to the powerful or to the wise - not in a worldly sense. That's the way the world judges things, but in God's economy, power is found in those lives that are wise in Him. We trust Him. Every soul is much like this little city here in Solomon's parable. You know, Satan is that king outside the walls who has come to overthrow your life, but Jesus is that poor wise man, if you will, who comes to offer life to all who will trust in Him and believe in Him.

So Solomon concludes chapter 9 by saying in verse 16, "Then I said, 'Wisdom is better than strength. Nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heard. Words of the wise, spoken quietly, should be heard rather than the shout of a ruler of fools. Wisdom,' " second of all, " 'is better than weapons of war; but one sinner destroys much good.' " Wisdom is still better. So Solomon tells us life is unpredictable and out of our control in the world and that the world, in true style, will not reward the true hero because they are too busy superficially worshipping temporary idols. And it can be that you are tempted - because there is no success in the world walking with God in that sense - to just give up on God. "Well maybe I just gotta get in line. I know what the world wants. I know what I can get from the world if I behave in a certain way." And Solomon concludes by saying, "Look, don't give up on God so fast." And he uses the word "wisdom" here - again and again that word that means to speak of God and His ways, to follow in your heart what His Word tells you, to view life through His

eyes, to apply His Word to life. He says it twice in verse 16. "Wisdom is better than strength." In verse 18, "Wisdom is better than weapons of war." True, one sinner can bring a lot of destruction, but even so, a poor man's wisdom - not heard from, not appreciated, not even remembered - is of greater value than anything else. God's ways are to bring life to all. And it is your word, shared from the heart of God, that is of greater value to the world than the great shouts of fools that draw so much attention.

Look, we can't control our future. I don't know how. I can't control sinful men and their evil pursuits. But God says it is the quiet man who lives his life for the Lord, whose words are on his lips - even if he goes unheard - that will find the greatest value in life. It is far better to be wise than to be strong, to be wise than to be powerful, to be wise than to be noticed. His wisdom brings life, and we must live daily applying it to our lives, for it'll be better than the shouts of fools.

Solomon wrote the book of Proverbs and uses the word "wisdom" in it 125 times, always with the same intent. Those who listen to what God has to say are wise. He wrote in Proverbs 26:12, "Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him." But he turned around in Proverbs 3:5-6 and said, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths." "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and depart from evil. It will be health to your navel." That's the King James Version. "To your flesh," the New King James. "And marrow or straightness or strength to your bones" (Proverbs 3:7-8). Life is found when we're wise. Is life unpredictable? Sure! Does God allow things that I don't understand? Man, constantly! Do I disagree with Him? Almost every time. But I know He's right, and I'm not. And the lesson for me is I gotta be wise. God, have Your way. Will you get as far in the world with His wisdom as you will living out the world's anticipation of things? No, you won't. Not probably. But it is the way of life that God has for you. It is better. The word better is "superior." Why? Because wisdom submits itself to God and realizes He's in control. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 9:10). "Some trust in chariots and some in horses; but we will remember the name of the LORD our God" (Psalm 20:7). That's the answer, isn't it? Of course it is.

Now, let me ask you something. Does that describe you? Do you go along with what you feel, or are you only following the loud voices in the world around you? Or, is

the guide and the purpose and the rest for your life that still, small voice of God's Spirit? Wisdom is better to all that the world has to offer. God can overrule the swift and the strong and the wise and the rich and the skilled of this world. It is far better we throw in with Him who loves us and has a glorious plan for us, and we allow our hearts to be delighted by the wisdom He gives us.

And even when, verse 16, few people stand with us, and His counsel may make you the laughing stock of the world around you, wisdom will win the ultimate battle that every sinner will lose without Jesus. They won't make it. You will. You will. Wisdom can save a soul. "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.....because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Corinthians 1:21,25).

Can I explain to you what happens to you in day-to-day life? I have no idea. "Why do you think God.....?" I don't know. But I do know He loves me, and when all is said and done, I'm gonna sit in His presence. And so to get from here to there, I can only rest in His care and let His Word guide my life. If that doesn't bring reward in the world, so be it. If it doesn't bring success in this life, fine. But it won't fail you. That's really all that matters, isn't it?

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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