

Why is life so frustrating?

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[0 : 00] Well, I think it's fair to say that plenty of people right now are frustrated by life, whether it's the coronavirus restrictions that stop us living our lives as we'd like, or even if it's the way the government enforces these restrictions upon us.

Social commentators and writers on current affairs attempt to capture the frustration that we feel with politics, culture, society in general.

And perhaps you're feeling frustrated right now because of your current circumstances. But it's not just our circumstances that frustrate. Many people are frustrated with life itself.

So Western writers and poets have often tried to express this. So let me quote some for you. So Shakespeare said, in Macbeth, I think, life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

Samuel Beckett said, life is an indefinite waiting for an explanation that never comes. O Henry, life is made up of sobs, sniffles and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

[1 : 11] And Ernest Hemingway, life is just a dirty trip, a short journey from nothingness to nothingness. And they simply describe the frustration in life that many people would echo because we know that life is frustrating.

But, though we may share their frustration, we certainly don't need to share their despair. And that's where the book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible helps us. Because the teacher of Ecclesiastes wants us to face up to the reality of life in this world, which is life that is frustrating.

And so he wants us to stare at the way things really are, but not to leave us in despair. Not to leave us in despair, but to show us how life just doesn't make sense.

Life doesn't add up if you leave God out of it. And so his perspective on life isn't a negative one, although it might sound like it sometimes. His perspective is profoundly positive.

It's full of faith. Faith. Not despair, but faith. And so amidst the frustrations of this life, the teacher in Ecclesiastes is calling us all to faith in God, to put our faith in God.

[2 : 23] And that's exactly what we see in Ecclesiastes chapter 8. We see that life is frustrating. This is seen through the abuse of power and powerlessness. But faith in God is required amidst injustice, amidst the wickedness, because God gives us life to enjoy, even while we don't know everything.

Even while we can't understand everything that is happening in this world, God gives us a life for us to enjoy. And so we see, basically, that frustration in life requires faith in God.

And that's really the big idea in this whole passage. Frustration in life requires faith in God. So this afternoon we're going to deal with it just under those two simple headings.

Frustration in life, verse 1 to 9, and then faith in God, verse 10 to 17. So first of all, frustration in life. The teacher is saying, life is frustrating, so we need to be wise.

Verse 1, who is likewise? Who knows the explanation of things? A person's wisdom brightens their face and changes its hard appearance. And so we need to be wise because we don't always know what's going on.

[3 : 32] And so chapter 8 confronts us with the frustrations in life that we can't control and that we don't understand. And so here we see two frustrations. Frustration with power, verse 2 to 6.

And then frustration with powerlessness, verse 7 to 9. And so frustration with power. He says in verse 2, obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God.

So the context in which he's writing, the king had absolute power. And whether good or bad, the king must be obeyed. He could do whatever he wanted to do.

And so the teacher is wrestling with how to deal with such power. And it's not clear what he means by an oath before God. It could be the subject's oath of loyalty to the king.

But the point is that we need to be wise under such absolute power. And so while he's talking about obeying the king, the application can be broadened out to mean human power in general, or even the power over us in terms of our work, government, or our boss.

[4 : 40] Because even those with authority over us don't always exercise their power well. And so we know that countries are governed by totalitarian regimes, that teachers give people no freedom, but we have countries to live in.

Other countries are democratic, but people are still frustrated by the rule of the government. And so the teacher's words are meant to help us be wise under this power and authority, whatever it is.

He wants us to know what to do when we are frustrated by those who call the shots. But before we get to that, we've got to recognize that those with power over us don't have absolute power.

Because God is the ultimate authority, and all powers and all authorities are under him. And so the teacher really outlines a pragmatic approach here.

Listen to what he says, verse 3. Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. What he's saying is, we have to play our part as a citizen or as an employee, and not to be too quick to stand in opposition to the powers over us.

[5 : 59] Now of course there won't be times when we need to choose who we obey, whether we obey the powers that be, or God. And increasingly so, I think, in our Western society.

I guess the most current example is the Scottish Government Hate Crime and Public Order Bill. Well, the teacher's wanting us to obey God, whatever, but we need to do so in a wise way.

And so there are times when we'll feel like opposing the power that is over us, but it wouldn't be wise to do so. Because sometimes we're actually powerless to do anything.

And so the teacher's saying, would you be picking fights if we aren't going to win? That seems to be his advice. So he says in verse 4, Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, what are you doing?

So if a king's word is supreme, then there will be times when it's best just to keep quiet. Because if we stick our head above the parapet, then we might just get shocked. And so we need to be wise.

[7 : 02] But being wise doesn't mean doing nothing. See what he says in verse 5 and 6. Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure.

For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a person may be weighed down by misery. So the teacher of Ecclesiastes isn't saying that you should compromise.

He's suggesting that we'll avoid harm if we know the proper time and procedure. Because there's always a proper time and a proper procedure. There's always a right time to act and a right way to act.

And so we're not just to cave in or to crumble or to capitulate. We're to take the wise course of action at the right time and in the right way. And I think there are some great historical examples of people who did exactly this.

Just think of Martin Luther, who was the catalyst for the reformation of the church. Or William Wilberforce, who tirelessly worked to abolish the slave trade.

[8 : 04] Or Lord Shaftsbury, who fought for children's rights. They were frustrated about how bad things were, but they weren't paralyzed by the politics or by the powerful systems that abused power.

But with wisdom, they knew the proper time and they knew the proper procedure. And so they seized the opportunity. And so before we move on, let me ask you a question.

Do you need wisdom to know how best to handle the power over you? Do you need wisdom? Well, don't take the teacher's words here as an excuse to do nothing.

And don't take them as an excuse to charge in with all guns blazing either. Because the wise heart will know the proper time and the proper procedure for every matter.

And so pray that God would give you, me, the wisdom we need. James says, James chapter 1 verse 5, If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God.

[9 : 05] And so there is frustration with power here. But there's also, secondly, frustration with powerlessness. And that's in verse 7 to 9. So verse 7, he says, Since no one knows the future, who can tell someone else what is to come?

As no one has power over the wind to contain it, so no one has power over the time of their death. As no one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it.

What he's saying is that we are powerless when it comes to the future, when it comes to death, and when it comes to wickedness. The future, because it's unknown. Death, because we don't know when we'll die.

And wickedness, because there's no escaping it. And so when he speaks about the future, he's saying who can tell what is to come? Nobody can tell what is to come. Who knew 2020 would be like this?

Nobody could have foreseen the kind of lives that we would be living right now. And we're powerless to control the way things are. Powerless at predicting the future, but also powerless at controlling the future.

[10 : 16] And then the teacher moves on to death. He says nobody has the power over the time of their death. Just in the same way that nobody has got the power over the wind. So the weather forecast might tell us that the wind is coming, but we can't control the damage it does when it comes.

And we know this because we live in Scotland. In fact, we've got the privilege of living in Glasgow, where it's worse. Where hurricane force winds will come without... In a second, we'll wreak havoc across the country.

Cars will be unturned. Damage will be done to buildings. Trees will fall. And there will be floods and loss of power. That's just what happens. We can't control the wind.

One time, somebody else's big blue recycling bin blew over our fence in the garden. And the fence is about to hide from me. But one morning, I looked out, and their blue bed had blown from their garden into ours.

I have a hard enough job pulling the blue beneath the gate, but it came over the fence because the wind is uncontrollable. So we can't contain the wind. That is what he's saying.

- [11 : 24] And we've got no power over our death either. Death always comes as a shock. Even if death is unexpected, it is still devastating when it happens.

And so despite advances in medical science and talk of a suicide, we are still powerless when it comes to death. And we're also powerless when it comes to wickedness.

And so in verse 8, he speaks of a soldier being discharged in time of war. And the soldier can't escape his duty. And so the teacher is saying, people can't escape wickedness either.

And it's just so frustrating. We're powerless over the future. We're powerless over death. We're powerless over wickedness. And he's saying, that is just the way the world is.

And so whether it's power, or whether it's powerlessness, it just brings frustration to life under the sun. Verse 9, all this I saw as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun, there's a time when a man lords over others to his own heart.

- [12 : 31] And so there's an irony to what he's saying here. Because those who lord over others with their power only end up getting hurt themselves. And it might be in this life where their irresponsible use of power injures them, or they die.

Because despite the great power that people can wield in life, they can't overpower death. So no king, no ruler, no dictator, no regime can control the future.

Or death. And this is the teacher's encouragement for us amidst all the frustration in life. And history bears the witness to what he's talking about.

Because wicked powers might strut their stuff upon the world stage, but one day the curtain comes down on those powers, and the show stops. And we've seen this from people like Adolf Hitler, Mount Satan, Saddam Hussein, and plenty others.

And so the teacher says that we are right to be frustrated, because life is like this, where we should be frustrated by the use and abuse of human power.

- [13 : 49] He's saying it is real, but you've got to know that it is also limited. And so we need to get a true perspective on the way things are in this world. Because if we leave God out of it, life without God just doesn't make any sense.

It's all meaningless. And that's why the teacher wants us to have faith in God, because that is the only answer to all the frustration in life.

It is an inherent part of our existence, but he's pointing us to God as the answer and as the solution to the frustration. So it's the first point, frustration in life.

Secondly, faith in God. His response to all the frustration is faith in God. Because life is meaningless if you only have this under the sun perspective.

That's a perspective without God. And so he says in verse 10, Then too I saw the wicked buried those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise. And the city where they did this, this too, is meaningless.

- [14 : 57] He's saying that even after death, there's still injustice, because even scoundrels can get a good funeral. And that only adds insult to injury if they're praised after they're dead.

And yet we know it happens. Some who've caused so much pain and grief and hurt to others in life often graduate to some kind of sametude when they die.

And the teachers say, all of this is just meaningless. It's meaningless, but it's also dangerous. Verse 11, when the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people's hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong.

So, he says, it's a great injustice when offenders aren't punished for their crimes. Because if judgment is delayed in any sense, it only encourages more people to do wrong.

When crime isn't punished, it only triggers more crime, which only causes more frustration. And I guess this has been happening in the United States all through the summer, and even last week, where many people who just feel the injustice about what's going on have taken to the streets to riot and do more wrong.

[16 : 12] And so the teacher is making an important point here. And what he says does require faith in God. That's the only hope in this frustrating world. Because injustice will always abound in every human society, even in Scotland, because injustice is always there.

From the abuse of power, spoken about in Ecclesiastes, to the abuse of power we see in the news, to the civil disorder we see in the old nation. But the teacher is saying to us, I want to assure you that justice will ultimately be done.

Yes, there is injustice. Yes, it's frustrating. There is wickedness. But justice is coming. But what does he mean? Verse 12, he says, although a wicked person who commits a hundred crimes may live a long time, I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him.

Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow. So here's why we, the world society, we can't do without God.

Because it might seem like the wicked get away with it. But it is only temporary because God is the judge. God will settle all accounts.

[17 : 38] And we're told it will not go well with the wicked. They will be judged, their sin will be punished, and they will be condemned in hell. And so the teacher is convinced that justice will come even if he doesn't know the details in the way that we do because the rest of the Bible fills them out for us.

But he has faith in God to bring about justice in the end. Because that is our only hope in a world full of injustice. But there's more because the teacher speaks with hope and certainty about those who fear God too.

Not just about what will happen to the wicked, but also to those who fear God. He says in verse 12 that it will go well with those who fear him. It will go better with those who fear God.

And it's interesting because if you've been following us through Ecclesiastes, what he says here contrasts with what he normally says. So usually the teacher describes life in this world and he says, I have seen or I saw.

So when you read through chapter 1, 2, 3, 4, I have seen or I saw. But here it's different. This time he chooses a different verb because he says he knows.

[18 : 53] He says, I know that it will go better with those who fear God who are reverent before him. So this time it isn't just an observation. This is a position of faith.

He is confident in what he hopes for and has assurance about what you cannot see. He believes that it will all be well for those who fear God but he's convinced that it will not go well for those who don't.

And so he is convinced that God will get it right with every single person. If God is a God of perfect justice, he will make no mistake when his judgment comes.

And that's why we need faith in God. So that we can leave all the injustice and wickedness and sin and evil with him. Leave it with him.

And know that the judgment will sort everything and it will sort everyone. All evils will be dealt with and all wrongs will be put right.

[20 : 02] And it's when we know this and grasp this and believe this that it makes the frustrations and the meaninglessness of life far easier to bear.

And so he says in verse 14, there is something else meaningless that occurs on earth. The righteous who get what the wicked deserve and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless.

So he's saying amidst all the meaninglessness in life, you need to have faith in God. So we need faith in God. Faith that God will exercise his justice because as we look around us, people don't always get what we think they should deserve in life.

So he's saying the wicked often seem to enjoy a good life whereas those who live a good life often struggle and suffer. And that is just the way it is.

And it doesn't make any sense. I know someone who used to work for the Crown Prosecution Service down in London and he found it so frustrating because criminals, murderers, and rapists would often manage to escape justice, quite easily escape.

[21 : 19] And it was so frustrating when everybody knew they were guilty. The poet Robert Frost said that duty consists of 12 persons chosen to decide who has the better lawyer.

So sadly, the justice system doesn't always work, does it? And yet what we're being told here is that God's justice system does always work. And so if there were no God, we'd just have to accept all the injustice and live with it because we could do nothing about it.

but, as Fyodor Dostoevsky famously wrote in the Proverbs Karamazov, he said, without God and the future life, everything is permitted.

One can do anything. And he's implying that if there's no God, then there's no hope of justice ever. And that's why Christianity gives us the best resources to cope with all the injustices in our world.

Whereas atheism gives us absolutely nothing. It's useless. Because if there is no God, then everything is permissible. There is no absolute right or wrong.

[22 : 29] And no one will ever be accountable for anything that they've done, no matter how wicked. And so the teacher has faith in God to sort it all out. And that's why faith in the Christian God of the Bible is a soundly rational belief.

It makes sense. And I hope you can see that if you wouldn't call yourself Christian. Christianity makes best sense of our world, of the way things are, and gives us a hope that nothing else ever can.

Christianity is our modern world's best hope. And that's why we can enjoy life, because that's what he says in verse 15. So I commend the enjoyment of life because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad.

The joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun. So he's saying despite all the meaninglessness in life under the sun, you can still enjoy life.

We should eat and drink and be glad. We should get on with the work that we've got to do and do it. We should go for a walk with our family and the dog in the sunshine.

[23 : 43] That's what he's saying. And enjoy it. The world is frustrating, but you should enjoy life because God has given you the gift of a life. All our days are given to us by him and they're to be enjoyed.

And so can you see he's giving us against the black backdrop of frustration in life. He's giving us a profoundly positive perspective to see that God is in control and that life should be enjoyed.

Because we know if we trust in the God of the Bible, we know that this world is always going to be frustrating because this world has fallen. It's broken.

The consequences of the frustration of this life are a result of the fall of humanity when we turn our back on the God who made us and who loves us. So things will never be what they're supposed to be.

Quite yet. And so we're still able to experience joy in every season of life when we have faith in God. And of course that doesn't matter. It doesn't mean that we ignore all the wrong in the world.

[24 : 49] We don't. We should face up to the world as it really is, just like the teacher does. But we should never despair because our faith is in the God who will one day restore this broken world and turn everything around and put everything right.

and this might be hard to grasp. And that's because there's a limit to just what we did know. Which teacher captures really well as he sums things up in verse 16 and 17.

When I apply my mind to know wisdom and to observe the labor that is done on earth, people getting no sleep day or night, and I saw all that God has done, no one can comprehend what goes on under the sun.

Despite all their efforts to search it out, no one can discover its meaning, even if the wise claim no, they cannot really comprehend it. What he's saying is life under the sun, this life is incomprehensible and God's work can't be fathomed and so we'll never be able to figure out the meaning of life by ourselves.

And so we've got to admit that there is so much mystery and so much that we just can't understand. But that doesn't mean that God isn't in control or that God is somehow limited.

[26 : 07] It simply means our wisdom and our knowledge is limited. And that's why we've got to put our faith in God, trusting that since he is the creator of life and he is the giver of life to us, then he knows what's best.

He knows how we should live our lives in his world. Because we don't create meaning for ourselves, we discover meaning from God. God. And just to be careful here, I'm not misunderstood, this doesn't mean that if you put your faith in God or if you follow Jesus Christ, that somehow life will never be confusing or frustrating or that all your problems will somehow disappear.

He isn't saying that. No, the frustration remains, but faith in God recognizes that while we can't grasp everything that's happening, he can still carry on.

Well, how? Not by rejecting God, but by seeing that life only makes sense because of God. At the beginning of the coronavirus, therapist Julia Samuel was interviewed for the Financial Times back in March, and it was on how to manage anxiety and grief during the coronavirus.

And here's what she said. She said, there's no one in charge that we know is going to sort it out. There's no saviour. And she pretty much sums up the secular answer for everything, whether it's the coronavirus, the abuse of power, wickedness, or injustice.

[27 : 46] The secular world, a world without God, has no one in charge, has no one who's going to sort it out, has no saviour. But Christianity offers us a God who is in charge, who knows what he's doing, and who is going to sort it out.

And so it's only when we know God and what he has done in Jesus and what he will do in the future that we have any hope in this frustrating life.

Why? Well, because God himself entered this fallen, frustrating world. He was born as a human, and he lived in this world and so he knows exactly what it's like.

He knows exactly what our experience is. But more than that, in taking on human flesh, this God suffered and died.

And so in Jesus Christ, we have the all-powerful God becoming completely powerless by dying on a cross. Jesus, willingly submitted to the human powers against him, and was prepared to face total injustice for you and for me, because he died for our sin.

[29 : 02] Because if God is just, he must punish all sin in order to be just. And yet Jesus faced the perfect justice of God on the cross, and he was punished in our place.

cross. And so when we turn from our sin and we trust in Jesus Christ, we have a saviour who sets us free from the condemnation that we deserve.

And so we are free to enjoy the new life that God gives us in this world, knowing that I will only get better when we die. And that's the only way we can cope with all the frustration.

later on in the Bible, we get later in Romans chapter 8, we find an echo of the teacher's words here in Ecclesiastes. Because in Romans 8, Paul speaks about the creation being subjected to frustration by God.

And the word frustration in Romans chapter 8 connects with the meaninglessness in Ecclesiastes. And so the creation is groaning in frustration because of sin. But it will one day be liberated from its bondage to decay.

[30 : 15] And so the good news is that Jesus Christ willingly suffered the curse of sin when he died. And so we still live in a fallen world where life is frustrating, but our greatest hope and our greatest comfort is that through Jesus we can enjoy everlasting life in this fallen creation, even as we anticipate God's perfect new creation.

that everything will finally be put right forever. What a time that will be. Let's pray. Thank you God that you have a plan for this broken and fallen world.

That plan centres on Jesus Christ because he entered into this world. He lived, he died, and he rose again, breaking the curse of sin.

And so in Jesus we see lives being transformed and restored. And we have the great hope that this world that is broken will one day be remade.

And you will bring in that perfect justice and all rights, all wrongs will be put right and all sin and evil will be punished and there will be perfect peace.

[31 : 32] We thank you God that that day is coming, all because of the good news of Jesus Christ. And so we give you our praise in Jesus name. Amen.