

## Ecclesiastes 8-10. Enjoy, no really.

### Home Group Notes

Christianity Explored is so exciting that I've given it its own page on the Church website. I've tried to put up the answers to most questions there do let me know if you have more.

We're all doing it together. It will start the week beginning Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> Jan. The Sunday sermons will be on Mark's Gospel and cover an aspect of the Homework you're supposed to have done. So there won't be any HG notes, instead your HG will enjoy a DVD with Rico Tice and a discussion on what he has to say.

Please send one or two people to the Rectory on 12<sup>th</sup> Jan 7.30pm for a final briefing on how and when to press play on the DVD and which questions to ask from which page (it really is quite boil in the bag).

Let me know if you would like copies of the Audio version – esp good for those who don't like reading and do like driving.

Welcome: When was the last time you invited someone to anything (churchy or nonchurchy) – how did it feel? When was the last time you were invited to something? How did you respond How did that feel? (You can probably see that this is headed towards a prayer point about who you might invite to do CE).

Worship: Christianity Explored (CE) makes the promise that new people to a group won't be asked to pray or sing. So enjoy the next two sessions of worship. IF your group contains only happy happy Christians for CE then by all means have a hearty sing and intercede if you find you've got time. For tonight, if you're feeling bold try the Methodist Covenant Confession. Do it slowly. There's copies on the website with the sermon, some of it is in the magazine. **Or try Psalm 37 it seems to fit 'Enjoy'.**

Word: *there's so much here that you could really go off on all sorts of fruitful red herrings.*

1. Read – 8.8-17 / 9.1-11. but you might want to skim read the rest of chapter 8 and also ch10.
2. Divvy up the three chapters and set each the task of finding some Ordinary Wisdom ('play by the rules' style). Most of it is in ch10.
3. What's good about this sort of wisdom, what's hard?
4. Put a finger on all the 'meaningless' references in these three chapters. What is it that irks Solomon? Extra point if there is the word "evil" close by.
5. 8vs8 ...wickedness will not release those who practice it. What would Jesus or Paul have said to Solomon about this? What's right about it / wrong about it.
6. What's Solomon's conclusions (8.12, 15, 16-17, 9.1, 9.7-10)? Is that a meaning to life?
7. How many of these have a reference to God in them? How come the word "God" doesn't show up anywhere else (or did I miss one).
8. 9.4. Is this true? Does it advocate cowardice / uncleanness?
9. 10.6,7 seem to be just wrong. What does Solomon mean by 'rich' or 'prince' here or what is he trying to say?
10. 9.8 – why do we not obey this verse literally but we're keen on vs7 and vs9?

### Works:

Pray for CE, for the 200 gospels we gave out over Christmas, for those who are coming on a CE, for those who are not. Pray about who you could invite to a group.

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Happy New Year. I hope you're doing ever so well with your New Year's Resolutions. Good Luck to you, go for it! A **stitch in time** saves nine, **measure twice** cut once, always wrap up warm. We grew up with all sorts of excellent wisdom that has been **handed** down to us. It's not the sort of stuff they can easily teach in school this is the kind that gets handed down.

**Play nicely**, tell the truth, knuckle down and do the work – you will get rewarded – you will get paid, you will get promoted. These are the unwritten laws. Medicine throws in its own wisdom too – watch the salt/ the fat / the sugar/ the smoking, Do some exercise and so **live longer!** The great thing about most wisdom is that **you already know** it. What is hugely difficult is to actually **apply** it. Yes I know I should lose some weight it's just the getting round to it.

The book of **Ecclesiastes** is for some people the first discovery that the bible wants to say something clearly **practical** and on a par with the best **self-help** manuals of today. “**Do not be in a hurry** to leave the king's presence” (8.2) – Oh yes, be careful how you treat your boss, he may be an idiot but if you treat him like one, things may backfire on you.

A dead fly gives perfume a bad smell (10.1) here we have our **Fly in the Ointment** proverb – You are I presume clever enough to know that this isn't really about flies or about perfumes – it's about seeing a simple truth and applying it a little wider, **One rotten** apple spoils the whole barrel.

Solomon who I think wrote this book – so he's writing some 800bc?ish. He applies this phrase to seeing how **a little stupidity can mess up a lot of good**. It only takes one sinner, one idiot to drag us into a war. It only takes a **slip of the tongue to break** a friendship. You know all this. What is tricky is the actual application of this kind of wisdom.

There's some lovely **health and safety** stuff here in chapter 10 vs8 Whoever **digs a pit** may fall into it. vs9 Whoever **quarries** stones may be injured by them, whoever **splits logs** may be endangered by them. Vs10 If the axe is dull and edge unsharpened more strength is needed but skill will bring success. Vs11 If the **snake bites** before it is charmed then there's no profit for the charmer. – all good straight forward wisdom stuff there. You don't need a sermon on it.

But, and there is a **big but**. There are two problems with wisdom literature, the first is that you know the truth of it, its just **knuckling** down to do it that's hard.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> is that you're going to **Die**. Most wisdom literature says Play by the Rules and **life will be good** to you in return. But we who live in the real world see that **Idiots get promoted** and people who break the rules get away with it and that good people very often suffer and struggle.

And that is why the book of Ecclesiastes is terribly **dispiriting** and draining. So the book begins with the phrase **Meaningless** meaningless, everything is meaningless. And we saw how If your **horizon, your world**, if everything that you see and value is only contained Under the Sun, then yes your life will be meaningless.

If you **only trust what you can see** and touch in the here and now then your life will be quite meaningless. So my advice back then was **LOOK UP**. If we can lift our eyes above the Horizon and see the God who comes to us, **to be part of our lives** then maybe we can discover a life of Meaning.

Jesus is described as the **Lord the giver of Life** – if we can learn to see in Jesus just that, then we will find the truth that Jesus comes to give us Life and life to the full. Look Up.

Solomon then speaks of all the **injustices that he saw (ch3-4)** And that got me wound up – so often **we don't see** wrong things, we have our own prejudices, our own problems, we're blind to other people's struggles – I'm very much struck by the phrase in the Methodist Covenant Confession where we confess where we have '**borne so lightly wrongs and sufferings that were not our own**'. The idea being that we should Carry one another's burdens (Gal6.2) So Solomon could see all these injustices, he the great wise, rich and all powerful **merely saw** them and **did nothing**. So my one word sermon there was **HAND**.

Because it seems to me that if you do see something wrong and you can do something about it that you **really should have a go**. But also we saw even in Ecclesiastes that while Solomon was **whining** about how unfair and meaningless everything is yet **God is at work**.

Ecclesiastes likes this word **Meaningless** – but the Hebrew word means Mist or Vapour and so I argued that maybe sometimes we should translate this word not as Meaningless but as **Temporary**. Life is temporary, friendships, work, marriage, children – its not meaningless but it is temporary – as if we are only on **loan** to each other.

Our children are with us for a few short years and then they **grow up**. It's not meaningless but it is **fleeting** and temporary. And that means that we should **value it greatly and appreciate** every moment that comes our way.

So my sermon to you before Christmas was **GIFT** – perhaps we could come to see that God has given us so much. If we could view our lives as a gift, view each other as a gift that that might help us to cope and live a **life worth living**.

And so we come to the **penultimate** sermon on Ecclesiastes. I asked a friend why Ecclesiastes is so **depressing** and he said it's because we **invest** so much in things, in **vapour**, in the **vain hope** that it won't be.

But no matter how much you do invest – in people or property – it is all temporary.

So in Chapters 8,9,10 we have lots of normal wisdom, good advice on how to **play by the rules**, but we also have this **slap** in the face that says 'We all share a **common destiny**' (9.2.) Whether you've been good or bad or wicked or righteous or clean or unclean or regular to church or regular to the whorehouse – **we all die**.

Now, Solomon **could say** We all die, we all get to face our maker, we all get to be **judged**. So he could use that as an argument for saying **Be Good Now and then** you get to go to heaven. Play by the rules. Solomon wouldn't say that of course because we know that you go to heaven **by faith in Jesus** and it's not about playing by the rules, what you do, earning your right to heaven – for more information come to the **Christianity Explored Course!**

Instead Solomon argues for how **massively fabulous and wonderful being alive is**.

We would understand a terribly spiritual writer saying **Don't worry about death**, you get to see the Saints who have gone before you. You get to be with Jesus. St **Paul** says I'm not sure what I want, to be in heaven **with Christ** would be fabulous but right now this is where I am. (Philippians 1.23)

Solomon doesn't do that because he wants to argue for how wonderful and **precious it is to be alive right now**.

**Solomon** gets cross at the **pointlessness** of death – dead people don't know nothing, they **don't contribute** their wisdom, they play no further part in our lives, they're gone. They have nothing to do with life Under the Sun.

**Better a live dog** than a dead lion (9.4). I used to think that that was about encouraging Cowardice over Bravery. I don't think it is especially doing that. I think this is all about **valuing life now**.

Solomon gets so cross he doesn't just **call death** meaningless he calls it **an evil**. And we have all seen this, we know it to be true - how some people die and they **shouldn't have died**, they died too young or they were cut off in their prime and it is all **terribly unfair** and I suspect that I am unsettling and upsetting some of you here today. Sorry about that.

There is something about death that is **wrong and unfair**. At least the live dog has hope, the dead lion has nothing. But until you have a **meaning to death**, I don't think you'll succeed in finding a meaning to life.

As Christians we very quickly play the **Heaven with Jesus card** and that's all very well and true and helpful but do be careful **not to belittle the Life** we have here and now. Solomon won't play that card so instead he concludes **Enjoy the life you have, now.**

He gives us his wisdom which is that it is **better to play by the rules** than to break them – even if wicked people get away with it, even if Idiots get promoted over you – play by the rules. Even if rule playing **ultimately makes no difference** because the **Great Leveller**, Death, comes to us all. So Solomon's advice is: Go, eat your food with gladness and drink your wine with a joyful heart, **Enjoy life with your wife** whom you love all the days of this meaningless life. (8.15, 9.7-9).

I realise that for some of you it must come as a **shock** to hear the preacher saying Go and Enjoy Life. The Church seems to be synonymous in some people's minds with **boredom**, restriction, **guilt** – so to get a sermon saying Go and Enjoy Life !? Alas there are some Christians who live as if the **message** is that we are to be **grumpy** and miserable and no laughing and no letting your hair down and so we are very often more **known for what we are against** than what we are for. But I'm preaching this morning – **Enjoy Life**. Go to the pub more often! Invite your friends round more often. Enjoy Life.

There are two ways of doing this. The first is **Denial**. Go to the pub in order to **drown out** your worries and your sorrows. Life is full of stress and distress so **dull the pain** of this troublous life with alcohol and entertainment. Anything to take your mind off Life. I have sympathy with this approach. I remember arguing about not giving money to the **homeless** – they'll only spend it on alcohol – to which one sharp man said Well wouldn't you if you were in their situation? I still don't agree with that but I have lots of sympathy for that position. Let the alcohol and entertainment take away the pain of life. For a moment let me forget about death and judgement, **let me forget about pain**, be it mine or others. Denial.

The other approach is the very opposite of Denial – it is **Faith**. A faith that sees yourself and your **life** as a **gift from God**, that sees your **days** as a gift from God (8.14), that **sees all that God** has done (8.17) and a faith that knows that you have **entrusted** yourself into the hands of God and so your prayer is **Thy will be done**.

Solomon says Go and eat and drink with a joyful heart for **it is now that God favours what you do**.

When is Now? We spend too much time **living in the past**, regretting what might have been, angry or sorrowful for it. OR we **fear for the future** and we carry our chips high on our shoulders and limit our futures by **imprisoning** ourselves in our own **woes** and worries.

(Robin showed me a helpful *diagram*. Do you have a problem in your life? NO = don't worry. Yes = Can you do something about it? NO = don't worry. Yes = Don't worry. )

No wonder we want to **dull the pain**. But the other way of **Faith** doesn't deny the pain but it does **see that God** is with us in the midst of it – and we're **open** then to hearing **God's call** on our lives.

Solomon says **Enjoy this meaningless** / shall we say **Temporary**? Enjoy this temporary Life that God has given you. Yes because it is passing. **Life is short**.

You're mulling over whether or not to **seize that opportunity**, to take that job, to train for that role, to say something you've been meaning to say to someone you have loved for so long – get on and say it! And Enjoy saying it!

There is **enough** in life that wants to **rob** you of your enjoyment, (Please don't let **church** be one of those!) but **by Faith**, we entrust ourselves to Jesus and we **obey His invitation**, as the Lord the giver of Life, to live the life that Jesus has given us, to live it to the full and to **enjoy** it. Amen.