

“When Bad turns to Worse”

Ecclesiastes 5:8

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Ecclesiastes 5:8 (ESV) *“If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.”* The author says don’t be surprised at injustice and realize that the officials protect each other; each official is watching out for the others in order to keep the system operating to the advantage of all of them. (source lost)

I’ve changed his name to avoid embarrassment to others who have been involved and so I will call my friend, Sean. Sean is a relatively young man with five daughters; he is being sued. Sean is a general contractor who has, like many, had a hard time making ends meet in this economy.

About six years ago he was asked to oversee the renovation of a dilapidated condominium complex. Mid-way through the job, one of the owners and he couldn’t agree on how to proceed with the project and so Sean withdrew. The other owner, a friend of Sean’s, asked if Sean would please not pull his contractor’s license off the job, which would stall the project, but leave it until the project was completed.

Fast-forward to four or five months ago. An attorney, “fishing” for a way to make some money, contacted the new owners of the condominiums inviting them to join a class-action law suit against the former owners and my friend Sean. The individual condo owners were asked to list any and all problems they had had with their properties no matter how minor they might seem.

When Sean was served notice of the lawsuit, he contacted his insurance company only to find out that his insurance didn’t cover construction on multiple family units – only single-family ones – it was Sean’s mistake. Then Sean contacted the former owner, the friend of Sean’s who was also being sued. That former owner offered to pay to fix all problems the condo owners had; that offer was refused. Sean then called an attorney friend who learned that the other attorney was known for these kinds of lawsuits knowing that most people can’t afford to fight the lawsuit. That was precisely Sean’s situation; he had no money, barely making ends meet with his relatively large family. Then Sean’s attorney told him it would take about \$10,000 to prepare for a trial and another \$10,000 to actually go through a trial. There was no way Sean could afford even part of that. And the straw that broke the camel’s back was when his attorney also said Sean had very little chance of winning in court even though Sean was not involved in any of the construction that prompted the lawsuit.

Sean’s attorney then advised him that the only way out of this was to file bankruptcy. Sean knew the negative impact a bankruptcy could have on his credit and

even bankruptcy costs money he doesn't have. But the worst part is that, according to bankruptcy laws, Sean cannot simply start another company – he has to change the way he makes a living (even though that kind of work is all he has ever done).

Simply by having that lawsuit filed, Sean's life was turned upside down and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it – the whole legal system is stacked against him. Sean is understandably anxious about how he will support his family of seven – and it is all so horribly unfair-unjust.

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Mile High Ministries is a Christian organization with which Missions Hills and others of us have had a longtime relationship. The director Jeff Johnson recently told me the story of Jonathan. Jonathan is now 27 having been brought to the United States illegally by his parents when he was 5. Jonathan has never known another home than Denver. He graduated first in his class from Denver West and was awarded a full-ride scholarship by the Daniel's fund. When it was discovered that he was an unregistered alien his award was rescinded. Nonetheless, Jonathan worked his way through Metropolitan State College graduating with a degree in industrial design. With the same false SS# he got a job and continued to work until he became a Christian. Now that he is a Christ-follower he refuses to lie any longer. But he has also married and has a daughter.

Jonathan's problem is that he doesn't know Mexico; he has not even been there since his parents brought him here when he was five. He has no prospects of earning a living in Mexico; he speaks Spanish but only with an American accent. With the help of Mile High Ministries, he has been to immigration lawyers only to find out that, if he returns to Mexico, it could take 18 years to qualify to come back home – there is a 10 year ban on reentry and immigration processing is now running 8 years behind.

Jonathan is terrified of taking his wife and daughter to live in Mexico. Yet there is nothing he can do about it except lie and live here illegally. No matter how innocent he was of the decision to grow up here the laws are stacked against him.

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In 1985 Willie Pete Williams, an African-American man from Georgia was accused of aggravated kidnapping and rape. Despite his claims of innocence, incapable representation, and disregarded exculpatory evidence he was sentenced to 45 years in

prison. 22 years later, in 2007 it was discovered that he had spent over two decades in prison for crimes he never committed.

For 22 years, he slept on hard bunks, ate prison hash, and could only wonder about the life he might have lived on the outside. What does that kind of injustice do to a man and his family? From Mark Earley found on Prison fellowship website February, 2007

Have you faced injustice? Have you had a child crippled for life because of an accident caused by a drunken driver? Have your life savings disappeared because of an incompetent investment manager? Have you watched helplessly as others have gotten caught up in an unjust system? Have you heard of situations that just made your blood boil? Have you had those times when you wondered or maybe even cried out in complaint, "Why doesn't God do something?" And yet what does the author of Ecclesiastes say? Don't be surprised!

Ecclesiastes 5:8 (ESV) *"If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them."*

As I studied Ecclesiastes 5:8-9 I could find no apparent connection between these verses and what preceded or followed them. It was tempting to skip over verses 8-9. Then I learned that no one (to my knowledge) knows how to translate verse 9 with any degree of certainty. Since I could do nothing but speculate on verse 9, I decided to confine my study to verse 8.

Ecclesiastes 5:8 paints a very pessimistic picture of much of life. I think Eugene Peterson has captured the sense of this verse in The Message where he paraphrases it, *"Don't be too upset when you see the poor kicked around, and justice and right violated all over the place. Exploitation filters down from one petty official to another. There's no end to it, and nothing can be done about it."*

This verse **does** seem consistent with much of what else we read in Ecclesiastes. The author has been strongly expressing some of his frustration with life and his inability to make sense of it merely from knowledge or nature or history or wealth or creativity or work (themes dealt with already in the book). Even this issue of injustice has been addressed before in the book: Ecclesiastes 4:1-3 *"Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comforter.² And I declared that the dead, who had already died, are happier than the living who are still alive.³ But better than both is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil that is done under the sun."* This certainly captures the hopelessness that can sometimes tempt us when we face insurmountable opposition and injustice. In fact the book begins with a very strong pessimistic statement: Ecclesiastes 1:2

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” Because we know what the author says at the end of this book AND because we know the full story of the Bible we know that **it is not as hopeless as it seems**. Even the Hebrew word translated “meaningless” which is also translated “vanity” can also be translated as “enigmatic.” “Vanity” means vain, empty, or without value. “Meaningless” means without meaning. An enigma is something hard to understand or explain. (see Craig Bartholomew [Baker Commentary on the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes](#), 93)

“Vanity” or “meaningless” connote hopelessness which is our temptation; we feel like giving up on life because of injustice. But knowing the full story it is more correct, I think, to express life’s imponderables as discouraging, frustrating enigmas.

When we experience or witness injustice our responses are to want a just resolution or at the very least to want a very good explanation! But the author has already accurately reminded us in the first several chapters of this book that life doesn’t often work that way. We live in a sin-ravaged world among sin-ravaged people (ourselves included) and the result is we don’t live in the Garden of Eden any longer.

So how are we to respond to injustice? Do we simply become fatalistic saying, “Life stinks and then you die?” Or do we become Pollyannaish, just refusing to see reality? The Bible, including Ecclesiastes, rejects both of those responses. Ecclesiastes 5:8 is very realistic about life – bad things, terrible things, happen.

As I thought about how this verse applies to our lives I knew I couldn’t just explain this verse and leave it at that. The reality of verse 8 demands a response. I might at this point discuss prayer because it certainly is a legitimate response. We have been given the privilege and even commanded to pray about everything that happens in our lives. The Scripture tells us that God uses prayer as a means of his grace. But when, even after prayer, God doesn’t choose to change our circumstances, what then? I might also at this point discuss the Christian’s obligation to seek justice and work to overthrow injustice. But when, after all our effort, injustice still prevails, what then?

The last two verses of the book of Ecclesiastes give me contextual liberty to remind you, even in the midst of injustice, of a foundational truth that undergirds all our other responses. Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 *“Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.”* ¹⁴ **For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.** This is part of the larger doctrine of Divine Providence.

“The Providence of God is his completely holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing every creature and every action.”

(Westminster Shorter Catechism)

In the face of intractable injustice and the other “impossible” situations of life, including death itself, the Bible teaches that our God is in control of it all. We do not

succumb to stoic fatalism nor do stick our heads in the sand pretending life isn't hard. We trust in the providence of God.

I'm indebted to Dr. D.A. Carson of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School for some of what you will read next. In the face of life's injustices and worse there are four truths that we must hold fast:

God is absolutely sovereign!

"The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths" (Ps. 135:6). Indeed, he is the one who "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11).

Humans beings are morally responsible beings who make significant choices.

"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. . . . But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . . But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" (Josh. 24:14-15).

God is absolutely good!

"He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he" (Deut. 32:4). "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

God loves his own, unfailingly!

Jeremiah 31:3 "I have loved you with an everlasting love!"

Deuteronomy 31:8 "The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."

(See Carson, [How Long O Lord](#) chapter 11)

Most of us realize that holding these truths in proper tension does not give an emotionally satisfying answer to every question, particularly to the question of injustice and other evils. Many would say that the presence of evil contradicts the concept of a good and sovereign God. While it may sound too convenient, we can only conclude that the compatibility of God's goodness and God's sovereignty is a mystery beyond our understanding. (Carson, chapter 11) The longer we live the more we realize that just because we can't demystify some things doesn't mean they aren't true. Carson wrote, **"Ultimately the Christian will take refuge from questions about God not in proud, omniscient explanations but in adoring worship."** (Carson, chapter 12)

God is the only God we have and he declares in his Word these great truths: He is sovereign; he is good, he loves us and we are responsible moral beings.

- The Providence of God assures me that nothing is life has to God, “gotten out of hand.”
- The Providence of God assures me that with God there are no surprises or insurmountable problems.
- The Providence of God assures me that though I might cry out “How long, O Lord,” God’s timing is perfect.
- The Providence of God assures me that at every second he is sustaining and governing every creature and every action. (Carson, chapter 12)

I am ultimately safe in the hands of the God who loves me and gave his son for me. In fact, if you think about it, though I don’t have time to develop it, God’s providence and the world’s injustice met on the cross of Jesus. As Joseph said it in Genesis, what the world meant for evil God meant for Good.

The truth is we will wait for the resurrection to see what we must now accept by faith. Hebrews 11:13 lists many of the believers of history and declares *“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.”* And likewise we must live by faith in the Providence of God.

But some of the biblical accounts such as those of Joseph, Daniel, Naomi and Ruth, and of the Apostle Paul are given to encourage our faith. And so does the following story:

It was 1948, three years after the end of World War II and Marcel, nearly 50 years of age, took his usual 9:09 morning train from his suburban home and headed into New York City. On this particular morning however he decided to change trains and visit a friend in Brooklyn. After the visit he took a Manhattan bound subway to go to his office. The subway car was crowded but a seat opened up and Marcel sat down next to a man reading a Hungarian language newspaper.

Having come from Hungary, Marcel struck up a conversation with the man only to learn that the man, whose name was Bela, had come from the city of Debrecen, a city Marcel knew well. During the war, Bela said, he had been sent to a German labor camp in Ukraine, had been captured by the Russians, but after the war escaped and made his way back to Debrecen. When he found his way to the apartment building in which his parents and brothers and sisters lived he found it inhabited by others who knew nothing of his family. He went from there to the next street where he had lived with his wife and found the apartment occupied by strangers who knew nothing of his wife. As he was leaving a young boy, who had lived in the neighborhood before, spotted him and recognizing him, told him that his whole family had been killed and his wife taken to Auschwitz, one of the worst of the Nazi concentration camps. After weeks of fruitless searching, Bela finally gave up hope and set out on foot to leave Europe. He had managed to immigrate to the U.S. just three months before Marcel met him.

As Bela was telling his story, Marcel couldn't help but think of a young woman he had met a year earlier who was also from Debrecen. She told of having been sent to Auschwitz then to a munitions factory and finally being liberated by the Americans and, since all in her family were dead, she was brought to the U.S. Marcel had been so moved by her story that he had written her name and phone number on a piece of paper that he had in his coat. Marcel turned to Bela and said, "Is there any chance your wife's name was Marya?" Turning pale, Bela said, "Yes, it was, how did you know?" Marcel said, "Let's get off the train." He took a stunned Bela by the arm and led him to a phone booth where Marcel called the number.

The phone was not in Marya's apartment but in the hallway outside and so Marya never answered it because it was never for her. But this time no one else answered and it kept ringing so finally she responded. Marcel asked her to describe her husband and give her address in Debrecen. At that he told her to hold the line for just a minute while he asked Bela did you live on such and such a street. Marcel then said to Bela, "Something miraculous is about to happen. Here take this phone and talk to your wife." Bela's eyes filled with tears as he took the phone and hearing his wife's voice, he began to just mumble. Marcel took the phone and told Marya to stay where she was; he was sending her husband to her.

That day a reunion took place that was like few others. The person retelling the story asked, "Was this reunion by mere chance?" Did chance introduce Marya to Marcel a year earlier? Did chance cause Marcel to take a different train that day? Did chance cause Bela to be reading a Hungarian paper at that exact time? Was it chance or did God ride that Brooklyn subway that day? (Focus on the Family magazine, no date)

Ecclesiastes 5:8 is **unfortunately true**: *"If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them."* But **of greater importance is the truth of the Providence of God** – His completely holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing every creature and every action.

In 1871 John Shairp wrote:

*'Twixt gleams of joy and clouds of doubt our feelings come and go;
Our daily state is tossed about in ceaseless ebb and flow.
No mood of feeling, form of thought, is constant for a day;
But Thou, O Lord, Thou changest not, the same Thou art alway.*

*I grasp thy strength, make it my own, my heart with peace is bless'd;
I lose my hold, and then comes down darkness and cold unrest.*

*Let me no more my comfort draw from my frail grasp of thee:
in this alone rejoice with awe, thy mighty grasp of me.*

*Thy purpose of eternal good let me but surely know,
On this I'll lean—let changing mood and feeling come or go.
Glad when Thy sunshine fills my soul, nor sad when clouds overcast,
Since Thou within Thy sure control of love dost hold me fast.*