

Wisdom P4

Ecclesiastes E2: The "Teacher" vs. Jesus

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The "Teacher" vs. Jesus

Jon: As you read through the book of Ecclesiastes, you're letting the teacher dismantle your perspective about reality. And it isn't pleasant.

Tim: At the conclusion of the book, the author says about the teacher - that the teacher's words are like a goad at the end of a shepherd staff. Sometimes they would sharpen it to a point. It's basically saying it's like a sharp, pointy stick and he's jabbing you.

Jon: Why read a book like this? Why put it in the Bible.

Tim: The whole reason why we're being exposed to the teacher's words is the author thinks this is really important exercise to have our illusions dismantled.

Jon: In order to do this, the author brings up three main points over and over. The first is death.

Tim: There are moments in life, here under the sun where it's hard to see if humans are any different than animals. And death is one of those.

Jon: The second somber drum he sounds is the steady march of time.

Tim: What does all of our striving and energy really produce because our life is hevel - it's here today, gone tomorrow?

Jon: Finally, the great equalizer, the randomness of life itself: chance.

Tim: Death, time, and chance just really have a way of putting a wet blanket on your life.

Jon: Amidst these cruel realities, the teacher also brings a surprising optimistic warmth.

Tim: The teacher acknowledging our frailty, our mortality, our lack of control is the silver bullet for coming to enjoy your life. There's a beauty, and a gift, and a goodness to things that because I cannot control them, and because they're not guaranteed.

Jon: At the end of the book, the author speaks up and tells us we must still fear the Lord.

Tim: Even though my every deed, hidden, good or evil, it may not have a guaranteed outcome in my lifetime, so I am still accountable for it.

Jon: The pointy, painful and promising wisdom of Ecclesiastes. Here we go.

Tim: One of the main purposes of the teacher is to target and dismantle all of the ways that people try to find meaning or generate purpose in their lives with things that ultimately can never give you meaning or purpose.

Jon: That's not a very nice thing to do.

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Tim: No, no. You almost see smile on his face, where he is like, "Oh, you think your careers going to make you happy? All right. Let's talk about your career and how it's going to give you stress and anxiety and make you die of old age, and then you pass on all your work when you retire to people who don't care about anything you did."

Jon: He finds joy in busting people's bubbles.

Tim: It does. You think the weekend parties are going to make you happy? You think people honoring you and giving you status...

[crosstalk 00:03:31]

Jon: This isn't a guy you'd want to hang out with really. Because you'd be like, "Oh, man, I had such a good weekend." He'd be like, "Yeah, but did it really matter? You're going to die."

Tim: Right. "You're going to die. Was it really worth the ulcers, and the sleepless nights? Monday always comes no matter whether you went to Tahiti or..."

Jon: When we talked about proverbs being personified, we were like, "You want this person as a friend. You want to go to her and ask your questions."

Tim: Yeah, right.

Jon: And it sounds like this person like you want to check in every once in a while, but for the most part, you're like, "Oh, oh" You see them coming towards you and you duck the other way. But you're on a calendar to check in.

Tim: That's right. Once or twice a year it's a reality check. It's interesting. At the conclusion of the book, the author says about the teacher's words are like a goad. It's like at the end of a shepherd staff sometimes they would sharpen it to a point. Basically, he saying it's like a sharp pointy stick and he's jabbing you with the words in these—

Jon: The book itself is calling his teachings a sharp pointy, stick that jabs you?

Tim: Yeah. It's a sock in the gut.

Jon: Yeah, it's how it feels.

Tim: But the whole reason why we're being exposed to teacher's words is the author thinks this is really important exercise to have our illusions dismantled. The main way, the teacher will go through all these topics, work, career, relationships, pleasure.

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He has two main sets of ammunition to explode your bubbles. The first one happens right in the opening poem right in chapter 1. It's the endless march of time that results in death for everyone. It's a great poem about like, look at a river. It just goes and flows out to the sea.

Jon: And it never stops. The sea is never full.

Tim: The sea doesn't fill up. And then the mountains that generate all of the snow that becomes the water, the thing has been there forever and it's going to be there long after you.

I always think of it - in Portland, I grew up, and now still live on Hawthorne Boulevard, which has become somehow like used second-hand clothing central - Portland clothing scene. But at the top of Hawthorne, and it's epic, is an old volcano called Mount Tabor. It's one of the biggest parks in the city.

The image that comes to my mind is, think how many fashion trends. Mount Tabor has seen come and go over the decades of bell bottoms and then pleated slacks, and then skinnies. And then bell bottoms again, or whatever. Now it's just whatever define your own fashion. But Mount Tabor has never changed. I mean, it has in the long while—

Jon: The stream of fashion has changed, but it never fills up.

Tim: Yeah. That's his vision of human existence is all this flurry and activity, but the world in which we live, it's steady, it's here long before us, and it will be here long after we die. And so, what does all of our striving and energy really produce because our life is hevel - it's here today, gone tomorrow?

With that opening poem then, he just has this ceaseless drum of we're all going to die. We're all going to die. Some of the lines are classic, and actually kind of scandalous to find them in the Bible.

Here's one from chapter 3. "As for humans, God tests them or examines them so that the humans might come to see that they are like the animals. Surely, the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both. One dies, so does the other. They all have the same breath. Humans don't really have an advantage over animals because everything's hevel. They all go to the same place; from the dust and return to the dust."

Then he says this. "Who knows if the human spirit even rises upward or the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?" Really dark.

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Jon: Right. And it throws a lot of doubt into things that we've learned about the image of God. There's something more; we're more than just animals.

Tim: Yes, yes, that's right. That's right.

Jon: Does he not have that perspective? Or is he just getting into a really dark place at the moment?

Tim: I think it's the latter. Again, remember, there's the teacher's voice, and then the teacher's voice is mediated to us through the author's voice, who really does believe humans are unique, and that there is a future beyond death.

But the point is that there are moments in life, here under the sun, where it's hard to see if humans are any different than animals. And death is one of those. You look at death and you just go, "Man, everybody dies." Like, I see roadkill on the street and then I look at a graveyard, and then I see in the graveyard the jerk, the wealthy, arrogant person, the really kind, generous man and the woman who gave her life away to her friends. And you go, "Look, they all ended up dead." It's hevel. It's the great equalizer.

Jon: "And who knows if the human spirit rises upward?" What does he mean there?

Tim: There's been a lot of debate about this in chapter 3:21. I think his point is, we can see all living creatures, animal or human, go to the dirt. "And we don't have any concrete proof," he says, "of what happens out after that." So the humans have some post-mortem advantage over the possum roadkill?

He says, like, "You can't prove it." I think it's what he's saying. We haven't really talked about this. As a follower of Jesus, this isn't the last book of the Bible for me. And my whole worldview is built on the claim of the apostles that Jesus rose from the dead.

So that puts this kind of line into a bigger context for me, and I hear that line differently than somebody than the teacher. But I think for his point, he's just saying, "Look at the evidence. Where does the evidence lead you? Everybody dies. If everybody dies, regardless of what kind of life they lived, what evidence do you have that humans have anything better going for them after death?" This is honest.

Jon: Yeah. Ecclesiastes is a very honest book.

Tim: Even if you believe in the resurrection of Jesus and the future hope for the world, that still you can't deny, or you shouldn't deny that you felt that same feeling before. Like really? Is this really true?

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Jon: Can we go back to the march of time idea?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: I don't think this is important, necessarily but I think it's interesting that we're at a time in human history where we have a perception of time that's very different than any other generation. Like we think in billions of years, which it's hard to do. I mean, I don't successfully think in billions of years.

Tim: We have these geological and formation of galaxy timetables that—

Jon: We could shave back what we understand about how physics works, and we can see how all elements are moving away from each other in space. And at the rate they're doing that, you rewind the clock and you get to this point where it must have all been compacted into one space.

Tim: Some 14.5 billion years ago.

Jon: And then they have a number based off the math. And then you could do the same thing; you can go forward billions of years and we can know in X billions of years, the sun will die, our sun will die. If the teacher understood that, I guess it would be the same sentiment in a way.

Tim: I think it would be.

Jon: He wouldn't say, "Hey, nothing never changes." He would say, "For the most part in our existence, nothing's going to change. But then if we look at the grand scheme of things, not only are we going to die, the sun is going to die, the universe is going to die."

So even if you figure out how to live thousands of years or hundreds of thousands of years or billion years, if somehow you figured that out, a good job, Ray Kurzweil or something, you figured it out, the sun is still going to die. And at some point, this entire universe is moving at such a pace that I think physicists think that it's just going to end with everything getting cold and just falling apart and being no energy left.

Tim: I think for the teacher; he says 2,500 years ago. So he's basing himself off of a tradition that for him, I was probably, thousands of years old by his time to of observation of the natural world and how things work. I think his point is, from our limited vantage point, nature is just this kind of steady cycling thing. And compared to humans, it's just a steady—

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Jon: Compared to human, it's a steady march of time. But what he didn't realize is even that has an expiration date.

Tim: Yes. Got it.

Jon: The mounts won't be here.

Tim: But even think about what you just said. Modern physics does show us galaxies from stardust and combust. It's like the river never fills up the ocean, the stardust just keeps recycling into galaxies. So, on in like 14.5-billion-year timeline, there's a beginning and there's an end or whatever. But in terms of the way the universe...anytime within that, it's just the same stuff happening.

Jon: Like a star, the hydrogen will all form from gravity and create a star, the star will grow, it'll start to create all these other elements in it and then eventually, it'll explode. And that Stardust will turn into planets and different things. And then another star will form and then those will orbit around it.

Tim: You could write Ecclesiastes 1, a version of it with that language vocabulary and still make the same point. It's like, but humans, what are we?

Jon: It's interesting. I just always get really fascinated thinking of those timescales. Even if you don't want to think of billions of years, you just want to think in tens of thousands of years, or I don't know how long it takes. But these mountains that he's talking about that have always been there, they have been.

Tim: They have always been there. That's right.

Jon: Mountains are going to get leveled out by wind, and then eventually, new mounts will form with new tectonic plates slamming into each other slowly over thousands of years. That's so crazy.

Tim: It's totally crazy.

Jon: And then here we are building houses on cliffs near the ocean, and we're like, "Hey, this is going to last forever." It's going to last like another 100 years, and then it's going to fall apart.

Tim: Yes. And we both have young toddler boys. So we're both outside in the dirt a lot, I imagine. I'm outside playing with my sons in the dirt, and we find a group of ants or something. And that's my observation of them is like all this flurry of activity but their ant hill is decimated by my son accidentally stepping on it.

Jon: Or the next rainstorm.

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Tim: Yeah, totally. But from the viewpoint of the last ice age or whatever, our entire civilization is like that. And that's his point.

Jon: That's his point. He says, "Hey, look, the mountains last forever," little does he know they're not. You could even say, "Death is the great equalizer, even the mountains will die."

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: And even if he's like, "The sun will be there forever," then we would go, "Actually know the sun is going too."

Tim: Which would probably freak the teacher out, but then he would say, "Exactly see my point."

Jon: Yeah, fueled his fire.

Tim: "You're just proving my point."

Jon: He'd get along great right now.

Tim: So that's the first one. Part of what makes the book really humbling or depressing on some read-through is just he's constantly talking about death from the opening poem to the very last poem in chapter 11 going on into 12. And he has this whole poem about aging - about your final years as an aging human and how while you're young, make the best of it because the days are coming.

He uses all these metaphors where the grinder sees and the windows don't show light anymore. Your body stops working. He says that too makes all your years of youth and enjoyment, feel like hevel because those years can go on forever, and you're miserable.

Another thing that the teacher really enjoy is — this happens a number of times — is his focus on chance. What he calls chance. For example, this is my favorite one in chapter 9:11. He says, "Here's something else I've seen under the sun." That's a common theme. He'll just be talking and then he'll say, "Here's something else I've seen." And then he says this, "The race doesn't belong to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor just food come to the wise or well to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all." It's so well put.

His whole point is, again, think Proverbs. Don't lean on your own understanding. Commit your way as to the Lord. Be wise.

Jon: Life is too random. We have no idea.

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Tim: His whole point is you can never guarantee. The fact that you can't guarantee it doesn't, therefore, mean that God isn't good, or that God's a jerk. It just means that God has ways of working or orchestrating things or allowing things that don't fit the Proverbs equation. And so, you're just going to have to reckon with that. Otherwise, you're setting yourself up for a fall.

So he'll run this through. He'll say, "There'll be a guy who works his whole career really hard, and he gets to enjoy his well in his old age. But then you'll get a guy who works his whole life, and he stays sleepless nights, anxiety and stress, then he has to leave it all retirement to some young person who doesn't care at all." And he's like, "They both work just as hard." So it's like glitch in the system that we've talked about already.

Jon: So like, if life was fair and you took two people who work just as hard and they made the same right decisions, that life should go the same for them both equally as well. But the reality is that life is so random. You set this guy in one direction, and this guy in the right direction and they both do the same things right. One guy could become a multimillionaire and have the gift to enjoy it. And then another guy could end up miserable and have lost everything or have money, but it drove them into depression. And that's not fair because he didn't do anything different.

Tim: That's right. That's exactly right. Again, his point there is, again, to deconstruct your expectations, and to help you reckon with how life actually is here under the sun. So death, time, and chance, just really have a way of putting a wet blanket on your life.

Jon: The march of time, everything will die and you have no control. The chance thing is really like, "Stop pretending you have control."

Tim: That's really it. That's exactly right.

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Tim: One might walk away from Ecclesiastes going, "Why did I ever read Proverbs? What's the point then?" And then here, the teacher just surprises you, where on a handful of occasions, he'll come and say, "You know, still though, being a wise, moral person fearing God, you should still do that." He'll say, like, "Wisdom, being wise, making wise decisions, that actually is good. Life will probably be a little bit more enjoyable before you for you if you're wise, and you can prolong your life."

Jon: You're increasing your odds.

Tim: And you're increasing your odds.

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Jon: You still don't have control.

Tim: No guarantees but better odds.

Jon: You're playing the odds.

Tim: So he says, "Be wise but don't try and stake everything on being wise." He says in chapter 7, "Be righteous, and be a moral person with integrity but don't take everything on that."

Jon: I remember that verse. The way it's phrased, it almost makes it sound like you shouldn't. He's saying, "Don't try to be overly righteous." Right?

Tim: Yeah, that's it.

Jon: And you're, like, "Overly righteous?" That's exactly what my Sunday School teacher wants me to do.

Tim: Look at what he says in chapter 7:16. "Don't be overly righteous nor be overly wise. Why should you destroy yourself? It takes a lot of effort to be such a good, moral person. But also don't be overly wicked. And certainly don't be a fool. Because why should you die young?"

Jon: Now, do we need to take this all with a grain of salt because he's in his dark place?

Tim: Look at his conclusion. He says, "It's good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. And the one who fears God will avoid all extremes."

Jon: So if you fear God, you will avoid being overly wicked. That makes sense. But fearing God will also allow you to avoid being overly righteous.

Tim: It sounds odd to say it, but I think in the context of the book, you can sort out what he's saying is, it's good to be righteous, it's good to strive to live a good, upright moral life, but something happens when my sole focus and mindset. Especially on the misreading of Proverbs that says, "Oh, if I just live like this, plug in the formula, God's going to shower wealth and blessing on me from heaven. He has to because I'm doing the right thing. I think that's what he's talking about overlay righteous.

Jon: An example would be someone who comes to you and says, "I did this, right. I did this right, I did this right, I'm doing this right, and I'm still not enjoying this and God hasn't it hooked me up with this." And you would say to that person, "You're being overly righteous? Maybe."

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Tim: I think that's what it means. Like maybe in a pastoral setting it's someone who's having a crisis of faith, because they didn't get the promotion and they've been working so hard and telling the truth, and they've been sharing with their coworkers about Jesus, and they've been praying, and they serve at church and "Why didn't God hook me up?" It's very easy for religious people to get into that mindset very quickly. When things go wrong, you start to think about all the things you've been trying to do. And like, "Why couldn't God come through?"

Jon: But as a pastor, you wouldn't go to that person say, "Okay, well, why don't you go and hang out at a strip club for a while. Level it out a little bit. You're being too righteous. That's not the point.

Tim: That's not the point.

Jon: The point is—

Tim: You found yourself in a mindset where you believe that God owes you something because of your attempts to live a good life, and that simply living that way will guarantee positive outcomes for me.

Jon: I have a very black and white thinking. So it's like there's a right and the wrong. So any decision you can make, there's the right thing to do, there's the wrong thing to do. And I can get paralyzed by that.

And of course, sometimes I'm just like, "I'm going to do the wrong thing. I'm just going to whatever." But when I am trying to do the right thing, it becomes paralyzing sometimes because you can't always know what the right thing is. I guess that's a point where it's just like, "Okay, let yourself off the hook. Maybe this is right. Maybe this is not, but if I obsess about it too much, I'm just being overly righteous." Would that be a good example?

Tim: Yeah. I think he's talking about my mindset. I don't think he's talking about being a moral person full of integrity for the long haul is a bad idea is what he's saying. But I think he's saying there's a mindset you get yourself into where you think that that's going to guarantee certain results in life. And his whole point is, "Man, I've seen righteous people die and wicked people die." It's like, "Don't overestimate your abilities."

Jon: The way he phrases it, there's a difference between overly righteous and overly wise and fearing the Lord.

Tim: That's right. That's exactly right.

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Jon: You can be overly righteous and not be fearing the Lord.

Tim: That's a good point. Yeah, it's a good point, Jon. That's a good observation.

Jon: Still fear God and be wise.

Tim: Yes, that's right.

Jon: You can overdo it.

Tim: You can under do it.

Jon: You can under do it. But the key is to fear God, which I guess begs the question for us to have a discussion about, what does that mean? Because in my mind, that's synonymous with being righteous in some way. Or at least it seems like being righteous is an outcome of fearing God.

Tim: Yeah, it totally is. As we talked about Proverbs, it's a moral mindset. It's a mindset that acknowledges that there is such a thing as right and wrong, and that I need to honor those boundary lines in life and in the universe and in my behavior, so that even when I don't want to do the right thing, I'll do it anyway because I know that I'm not God and I fear God. There's a reverence and awe that I don't get to redefine good and evil.

I mean, the teacher says that's a good thing. That's going to save you a lot of trouble. But what it won't do is guarantee you success.

Jon: Overly righteous, it could mean a mindset but could it also mean sometimes you just got to cut yourself some slack. Like, God loves you and you're not going to do everything right, and every once in a while, there's going to be the moment you're like, "I know, this is the right thing to do. I just can't." And for you to go, "You know what, there's some wisdom, I feel like God's okay with me not taking this problem on or not. I'm letting this one pass."

Tim: Yeah, that's interesting.

Jon: I know if someone came up to me and said, "Jon, why did you let that pass?" "If that wasn't the right thing to do, I'd be like, "Yeah, you're right. I just didn't have any more energy. I was tired. I know that person over there now is going to have it worse because of that, but I was going to drive myself crazy if I tried to try to be the hero." Is it don't try to be the hero?

Tim: That's really interesting. Personal too. I think—

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Jon: The Messiah complex thing?

Tim: No. There's a lot of scenarios. What comes to my mind is just personal experiences in local church leadership, but just leadership in anything. Being a part of a leadership team or an individual leading something, well, you get faced with decisions where there is no great decision. There's just probably the best option available and it's better than the other one. But neither one is the great decision for what you would hope. And then you do it, and you wish it could be different but you don't have any control over that. It's really interesting.

Jon: Here's another example. I can't remember what this is called but there's this dilemma. It has a name. Hopefully, I could describe it well. But basically, if you came up to me and said, "Jon, I'm going to die tomorrow. I just need 10 bucks," and I said, "Sorry," morally, that's not righteous. I can give up 10 bucks to make sure that you survive another day.

Then you extrapolate that out and there are 1,000 people somewhere in this world and organizations trying to serve them that if I gave 10 bucks I would save their lives. So what's the difference between me saying, "No, Tim, I'm not giving you 10 bucks; see you in the afterlife" and me saying no to these organizations?" And the extrapolate that out, and why should I ever shop at New Seasons or Why should I ever go have a nice meal or why should I ever do anything? And at that point, it's like, "Yeah, that makes sense." How do you live that way?

Tim: The scenario you just painted plus the leadership scenario plus the hero complex—

Jon: Might be somewhere in there.

Tim: No, I think we're in that same ballpark of—

Jon: Do your best, live a righteous life, care about people and try to help the world.

Tim: Yeah. Because notice what he says is that over righteousness and over wisdom or being over utilized will destroy you.

Jon: It'll destroy you.

Tim: And then he says being overly wicked and super foolish, you'll die young. So, the whole point it seems like there's so much good that needs to be done in the world, if you try and do it all, you'll destroy yourself.

Jon: And you need to leave some room too — and he talks about this later — just enjoy your wife, enjoy your food, to enjoy...

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Tim: It's almost like if you're going to humble yourself and recognize your frailty mortality so you can't figure everything out, there's also this balance of recognizing your frailty and mortality, you can't solve everybody's problems in the world. And God's not going to hold you accountable for that. You are responsible to do what's in front of you - fear God.

Jon: Because I like to do the right thing.

Tim: I know. I think many people do. Maybe even most people want to do the right thing.

Jon: They want to be an admirable person, make wise decisions, have things go well for them, have things going well for others, make a difference in the world.

Tim: I do think there are some people, temperament wise who obsess over that. That's a hang-up for them - a point of constant stress for them.

Jon: For them to just fear the Lord.

Tim: My wife, Jessica has an amazingly generous heart, and something about just seeing homeless people around the city masses with her. So she uses this image one time where what she wishes is that she could just be throwing plates of food and money out the window of the car while she drives through downtown and making spaghetti dinners. That she's just giving it away as we drive along. That's what she's constantly feeling.

Jon: She's feeling that.

Tim: She's being tortured. When she drives around the city, that's how she feels. And yeah, we're just processing that because I'm aware of those people and their circumstances too.

Jon: We walked by a crew of them every lunch.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. I'm very aware of them, but we have a different emotional response. I think there are some people for whom just hardship and suffering in the world makes them feel extremely anxious that they are not the ones solving that problem. And I think his point is, you can help solve some problems.

Jon: It's good that you feel that way. It's empathy—

Tim: But you'll destroy yourself if you try and act on every one of those feelings

Jon: Or let it drive you into a miserable state of consciousness.

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Tim: Yeah.

[00:35:59]

Tim: What are we supposed to do with all of this - death, march of time, chance, be wise but no guarantees? That all seems like it's setting you up to be an agnostic or a relativist. To me, what's most fascinating about this is for the teacher, it's exactly the opposite. For the teacher acknowledging our frailty or mortality, our lack of control is the silver bullet for coming to enjoy your life. And that's very non-intuitive for Westerners, I think.

Jon: Not at all. I feel like I want to talk about this because I want this to sink in for me because I love this sentiment. There's the *carpe diem*, seize the day. There's this, you know, it's in vogue right now with meditation and just don't obsess about your thoughts; just kind of enjoy your breath, and just be present. I think there's something here that seems to overlap with that.

Tim: I think so, too. This is one of those points where we are reminded that the Bible is Eastern document. From modern Westerners point of view, American Europe—

Jon: It didn't pop up in the main Europe.

Tim: It's a very much Eastern mindset and mentality. This is one of them. There are six different times where you're on a downhill slope in some poem or something essay of the teacher and he's like, "Meaningless hevel, you're going to die." And then he'll just stop and he'll say, "Enjoy your life. Go have a drink with a friend. Enjoy your wife if you're married, eat a good meal." Then you're like, "Wait a minute."

My favorite one is in chapter 5:15. He says, "Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb. As everyone comes, so you depart. They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands. This is a grievous evil. All their days they eat in darkness with great frustration, affliction, and anger."

Jon: Who's eating in darkness? The dead?

Tim: People who work hard but you can't take any of it with you. So all your days, you're working to generate wealth, and you eat and darkness, and you're frustrated and you're angry, and then you die.

Jon: Why are you eating in darkness?

Tim: I think that this is a description of a bad week at work.

Jon: Okay. You worked late, you're eating by yourself, everyone went home.

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Tim: And then you die in the same exact way you were born. It's like you're so screwed up. And then his next sentence is, "Here's what's good: it's appropriate for a person to eat, drink, and defined satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of your life that God's given, because that's your lot."

So somehow, recognizing I'm frail and mortal, I can't take any of this with me, but somehow in there is something good. And I find a good meal and a drink and some degree of satisfaction in this work that has no eternal significance, as far as I can tell today.

Jon: Let's paint the portrait again. You're late at work. You just had a horrible day. I mean, someone shewed you out, you shewed someone out, a sale fell through, like all these things, and now you're late, you're trying to clean it up, you're missing an event that your family's at that you really wanted to go to, you're tired, and you skipped lunch, but you still don't have time to eat so you're just slamming something from the like cafeteria that's gross while you're trying to plug through some emails wishing you were home, and it feels miserable.

And then he says, "Stop for a second and just enjoy that moment because that's your lot. It might feel miserable, but this is life. You're doing it. Enjoy that food, enjoy this next breath, and then do that email and enjoy the fact that you had one of the worst days of your month and then move on." Is that kind of what he's saying?

Tim: I think that's what he's saying. Yes.

Jon: It's very zen.

Tim: It's super zen. It's really surprising. Six different times he has a moment like this. Chapter 8: Here's something else that's hevel on the earth. Righteous people get what wicked people deserve and the wicked people get what righteous people deserve. This is hevel, I say. So here's what I commend. Go enjoy your life because there's nothing better for a person under the sun to eat, drink, and be glad, then joy will accompany them and all their toil, the days of life that God's given them."

His whole point is like, things don't always work out in life, and you can't do a thing about it. And somehow there's a release there that enables you to go have a drink with your friends and people you love and to just acknowledge the fact this tastes good.

Jon: And these people care about me.

Tim: Care about me, and I have no control over any of those. I think that's his point.

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Jon: And everything else right now is falling apart, but this glass of whatever tastes great.

Tim: There's a gift — he calls it the gift of God — coming to terms with my inability to control basically all my life circumstances.

Jon: I love that this is in the Judeo Christian tradition. Like hidden here in this book is something that feels very kind of Buddhist or something. It's like, "Hey, no, this is real. You're going to have to do this. Enjoy. Take a breath."

Tim: It's interesting. Other than talking with friends or acquaintances who were Buddhist and reading some introduction of world religions, it's interesting to see what's the real overlap, and then what's the difference.

I think from a classical Buddhist point of view, it would be I'm trying to lose any sense of my own individuality or will, and allow my consciousness to be absorbed into the oneness of the universe. That allows me to be detached from any of my life circumstances or having emotional responses to them. I think that's the basic idea.

Jon: That sounds familiar.

Tim: Whereas I think for the teacher—

Jon: He's actually being even more centered in that emotion. Yeah, because this whole point is God's in control, God's doing this, I just can't figure out what that...I'm not God." And so, it's this place of fear of humility before God, and giving up control to a person who I don't always understand, but I have to learn how to trust and I just have to reckon that I don't have control. And somehow I can see my life as a gift from God even if it sucks.

Think about what he means here. There's a beauty and a gift and a goodness to things that because I cannot control them, and because they're not guaranteed. I think that's what he's saying.

Jon: There's a beauty because you can't control it or beauty in spite of the fact that you can't control?

Tim: His point is you can't control what your workday or your career produces. So, enjoy whatever it is that you get out of it.

Jon: Enjoy in spite of.

Tim: Yeah, enjoy in spite of. I suppose that's for difficult things. And then there are other things like he says, like a good meal or drink or friends, you enjoy it because you're not guaranteed a best friend in life and you're not guaranteed to live in a place

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where there's good craft breweries around to enjoy good beer. But when you get one, here it is, I'm here right now enjoying this. There's a beauty to things you can't control.

[00:45:21]

Tim: Blaise Pascal, he has this profound quote that's one of his thoughts and Ponce'. To me, it summarizes so much of what the teacher is trying to say. He says, "We're never satisfied with the present, we anticipate the future is too slow and coming as if we can hasten its course. Or we recall the past to stop it's too rapid flight.

We are so unwise, that we wander about in times, which are not ours, and do not think of the only time which actually belongs to us. We are so idle that we dream of those times which are no more and we thoughtlessly overlook the only time that exists. It's because the present is generally painful to us so we can seal it from our sight because it troubles us. And if it happens to be delightful to us, we regret to see it pass away.

We try to sustain it by the future and try to control matters which are not in our power, preparing ourselves for a time that we have no certainty of reaching. So we should each examine our thoughts and will find that they are all occupied with either the past or the future. We scarcely ever think of the present, and when we do it is only to take light from it to arrange the future.

The present is never our end. The past and the present our means. The future alone is our end. And so we truly never live but rather hope to live. And as we are always preparing to be happy, it is inevitable that we should never be so.

Jon: That's well put.

Tim: Oh, dude. That's it. That's probably one of the best summaries of Ecclesiastes I've ever read.

Jon: I mean he's basically making a case for living in the present, not being obsessed with trying to control the future or just living in the past.

Tim: Or creating an illusion of happiness that we don't have anymore.

Jon: You think this is a good summary of Ecclesiastes. Do you think that a good summary Ecclesiastes is how to live in the present?

Tim: Oh, maybe I should say I think it's the best summary of the teacher...

Jon: The teacher in Ecclesiastes?

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Tim: Yeah. That I've come across.

Jon: Again, because the teacher is the bulk of the book but the author is bringing him so that you can consider it.

Tim: That's right. So being in the present and viewing what's right in front of me, seeing its giftedness, its goodness, six different times. It's not a long book. Six different times, he goes through this exercise. And death and the march of time, those get repeated a lot, but this is one of the most repeated things in the book other than the word "hevel."

So this ability to see and even the pain and difficulty of my present some kind of gift. That's clearly a major theme for the teacher. It's really profound. I think what Pascal is playing out here is a way into what the teacher's saying. You're still breathing, you're still alive, you can still laugh. This isn't something that any person can ever say on someone else's for someone else.

Jon: Sure.

Tim: All you can do really is say, "Listen, I'm trying to get here and maybe this will be helpful for you but man as a pastor I'm always so aware of this when I'm teaching in a Sunday gathering and it's like, I know that I have no clue of the stories that are in the room, and so, I'm not going to try and tell someone they should have a good day.

But I do think there's wisdom here because a lot of the reasons we're not having a good day is because we have really screwed up expectations out of Christianity or out of life in general. And that's what this book dismantles for our good.

Jon: It's really interesting. I love how he talks about how we were using the present to try to control the future and it's kind of futile in some ways. But it's not completely futile and that if you are wise you're increasing your odds.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: So it seems like there's this little give and take of like, yes, spend some of your time increasing your odds, thinking things through, making good plans, being reflective about the past to learn from things and then thinking about the future and architecting plans for how to go." There's wisdom in that.

But then, if you're always stuck in that gear, then that's a cruel joke. Because, first of all, it might not work out, and second of all, then you never actually just living. And so it kind of seems like there needs to be a balance there.

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Tim: Yeah, that's well said. I think that's right. We're almost back to don't be overly righteous.

Jon: That's overly wise. Overly wise is like, "From 6 am till noon, I reflected on the past, and then from noon till bedtime, I planned for the future." "And when did you live that day?" "I didn't."

Tim: There's some days where I put my head down on my pillow and it's like, all of a sudden, I wake up, and I'm like, "Wow, wow, where's my mind?" Like, I've just been churning on like, "Oh, there's not enough time, I got to get this thing and solve that problem. I realized my whole day I've just been in some time scarcity problem-solving mindset. And then I didn't actually even enjoy anything today. So sad. I think there are seasons in life I think we all find ourselves there. And half a dozen times the teacher says, "Just stop. Just stop."

Jon: I think that's why people sometimes like to run long distances. What I've heard from long distance runners is at a certain point you are so tired that all you can do is focus on running.

Tim: Yes, yes.

Jon: You've talked about this riding your bike?

Tim: I have, yes.

Jon: Like, if you're writing up a hill, you're just like, "I'm just going to ride up this hill. That's all I'm doing right now."

Tim: And that's all you can think about.

Jon: And then I've had it described this way where the runner says, "I stopped thinking about things, and I'm just running. But then all of a sudden, the thoughts that I'm having are no longer the ones I feel like I'm trying to control things. It's just like it gets into a different rhythm." And it's just different creative rhythm where, like, when you do have a thought, it's almost like a dream state where it's like, you're just letting it come and you're like, "Oh, that's an interesting thought." And then it goes. It's kind of a picture of being present. You have to exhaust yourself before you could get there.

Tim: I know it. Before my knee blew out, I used to run a lot. And that was what I loved most.

Jon: Did you run a lot?

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Tim: Yeah. For me, it was like 25 minutes in.

Jon: Oh, yeah. That's when it would click?

Tim: Yeah, 25 to 30 minutes in, and then I couldn't think about work if I wanted to. Just had to think about my breathing. Very interesting. Again, that's another overlap with more Eastern worldviews that recognize that the state of our bodies has so much to do with our ability to think in a healthy way.

[00:54:02]

Jon: Moderation, live in the present, don't try to control things.

Tim: Life is full of these things that are out of your control and that don't always make sense. Death, and chance, and time will put those in your face every day if you think about it too much. Then out of that flows, what did you do? We still try and be wise, just don't expect too much out of it. And then the gift of God thing.

Jon: Which is to enjoy your lot.

Tim: To be present, and to enjoy what's in front of you, no matter what that is.

Jon: And so the author puts this in front of us to what end? Why does the author come and say, "Listen to this teacher and these things?"

Tim: Well, he tells us why. I mean, the author is anonymous, but the very end of the book in chapter 12, the author says, "The teacher was wise. He imparted knowledge to people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many Proverbs. The teacher was a wordsmith he says. He search to find just the right word."

And he affirms. He says, "What he wrote was true and right." Then he says this. He says, "The words of the wise are like goads, and their collections of sayings are like embedded nails." So he recognizes this life is painful, and it'll hurt you to hear this, but you need to hear it.

Jon: And why? Because ignorance is bliss, right?

Tim: Yes. What he said earlier, he says, "Learning will make you sad." He says it here. He says, "Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. Of the making of many books, there's no end, and much study wearies the body." So it's almost like he's hedging now and here's saying, "Listen to the teacher, it's very important that you hear it but at a certain point—

Jon: This is the author?

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Tim: This is the author speaking about the teacher's words.

Jon: Oh, and he's the one that says, "Don't—

Tim: Be warned of taking this even further.

Jon: We've gone far enough.

Tim: We've gone far enough, I think is what he's saying. Because, listen, you can rack your brain over the existential questions and write a million bucks and all you're going to do is make yourself tired. I think that's what he means.

Jon: It's like he drove us over to this ledge, this like fantastic, gorgeous just cliff and he's just like, "This is the end. We're stuck here." And then you think you're there and you think, "Okay, I guess I'm going to have to jump off of this cliff." And then the author goes, "Cool. Let's not go any farther."

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: Like, "This is a good place to have gone to looked at this. Now let's—"

Tim: "You'll be shaped by this experience. You'll remember it because you got poked, you got stabbed by the goad, but this will destroy you if you take this all the way to the bottom."

Then the author's bottom line at the end of the book, it's a little concluding poem. He says, "Now we heard everything. Here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God, keep His commandments. This is the duty of all mankind, for God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it's good or evil." So he says, "No matter what's been said, we're Israelites." 10 commandments, the Torah, the covenants. God's creator, He's going to bring justice to our world.

Jon: He's doing something with us.

Tim: And even though my every deed hidden, good or evil, it may not have a guaranteed outcome in my lifetime, I am still accountable for it." If I steal paperclips from work, I might not get fired. And if I worked really hard, and no one ever acknowledged it and I didn't get the promotion or whatever, all the same, everything I do will ultimately be weighed and held accountable.

He calls that God bringing every deed into his judgment. Which is not a bad word, especially in the Old Testament. It's justice. Isn't it interesting judgment has negative connotations in English, but justice has very positive connotations? They're basically

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synonyms. That's what this is about. We want justice. We want people to be held accountable.

Jon: Well, certain people.

Tim: I want people other than me and the people I care about. So there's this idea that even though life is shrouded in hevel now, it won't always be so. That's what he's saying. God is going to clear the hevel one day.

Jon: One day the fog will be lifted.

Tim: Yeah. And everything that we've done, it will be very clear what the consequences are. Because you see a really horrible person and you think, "Where are the consequences for their horrible behavior?" And he's like, "Listen, God will bring justice. Right now, hevel."

Jon: I still really like this image of the fog. We talked about that. Because when you're driving in fog or whatever, it's disorienting, you kind of lose track of where you're at. It's a little bit scary sometimes. Life is like that. And in this fogginess, things are going to be clear, things are going to have worked out the way they should, the way you expect, so realize that." And then also in the very end he goes, "But one day all this fog will be lifted and everything will be seen for what it is. And so fear the Lord."

Tim: It's a future hope that ultimately does give meaning to my behavior. So you go back and you realize, "What the teacher was trying to focus on was life under the sun. Life now is we experience it."

Jon: Life in the fog.

Tim: It's like life in the fog. And life in the fog might start to eat away at your motivation to do the right thing and to fear the Lord. And life in the fog, you're going to see things happen that seem like they go against what ought to happen in the world, and they certainly go against what the Proverbs say.

There's a profound forward focus here at the very end of the book that's very similar to...I mean we're in the same neighborhood of a Jewish Christian worldview of a hope for final justice. And so, the wisdom of this book is for me to adjust my expectations to life here under the sun that allows me to enjoy it because I'd really screw it up a lot of the time. But it's still good and there's still goodness worth enjoying despite the fact that there's no guarantee that it will work out for me here.

So in a way, Proverbs is setting out this general rule: live this way and this will likely be the outcome. Ecclesiastes comes along and explores it from our perspective of

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the exceptions. But wait a minute, it doesn't always work out that way. What does that mean for me? What kind of world am I in right now? What should my expectations be? That's Ecclesiastes.

Then Job is going to sit in the same place of Ecclesiastes is but then explore the question of what does that mean about God, and who God is, and how God interacts with the world. Ecclesiastes was focusing on how I deal is the world in light of the hevel. Job will then contribute to the conversation and guide us in how we think about who God is.

Jon: Can we do a little thought experiment really quick?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: We talked about how like if you went to...I think I turned it into a bar. You walk into a bar and there's Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, and you get to sit down with them and ask some question. Let's say you're going to sit down with them and you're like a new parent. So you're having your first kid, you plan on having a lot of kids. And you say, "Hey guys. I want to do this parenting thing right so give me give me your perspective." Proverbs is going to say, "Well train them up, and teach them the right thing—

Tim: Fear of the Lord.

Jon: Discipline them.

Tim: Work ethic.

Jon: Pass on this wisdom to them and it's going to be great and you're going to be so blessed that you have so many kids and they're going to have great prosperous lives. So use wisdom." Then you turn to Ecclesiastes, and he'll say, "That's interesting."

Tim: I have this friend who—

Jon: He did all that and one of the kids died prematurely, another one hates him now, and the guy is now old and he realizes he has to pass on everything he worked for to this kid who's probably just going to blow it on foolish things and he was as wise as he could be. So what I would recommend is, "Do your best, don't kill yourself and just cherish those moments with your kids. When you're there and you're playing Legos with them even though really hurts your back, this is it. This is your life and this is a gift from God, this moment right now.

Tim: You reading Pete the Cat for the 19th time in a row.

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Jon: Or maybe they come up and kiss you on the face and you're like, "Enjoy that." But maybe they're screaming bloody murder in front of someone you don't know and it's super embarrassing. But these are the moments that you got, so just enjoy it. Just enjoy it.

Tim: That's well said.

Jon: But that's Ecclesiastes. Then you got that the author who's kind of sitting next to Ecclesiastes and going, "Yeah, I'm glad you heard that but also remember that everything you do will be brought to light and fear the Lord."

Tim: "You are accountable before God for how you raise your child."

Jon: It's almost like in this thought experiment we need Ecclesiastes these and Ecclesiastes these like chaperone. Like let them talk and then he's like, "Okay, I'm glad you heard that, so now just fear the Lord."

Tim: That's a good analogy. And then Job is this wise old person and says—

Jon: "I had a whole group of kids and they all were taken away from me."

Tim: "And your family along the way will probably blow up in some way, and I want you to know that God is committed to you and that He's trustworthy even in your darkest hour." I think that's how the conversation would go.

Jon: That's the wisdom literature.

Tim: The wisdom literature of the Bible. So amazing. It really is being brought into this 3,000-year-old conversation about what kind of world we're in and how to live well before God in this world.

Jon: That's it. Thanks for listening to this episode of The Bible Project. I'm Jon Collins, and that was a conversation with Dr. Tim Mackie, our good friend Tim Mackie on the book of Ecclesiastes.

We boiled this all down to five-minute video that we put on YouTube. It should be up on YouTube end of July 2016. Our YouTube channel is [youtube.com/thebibleproject](https://www.youtube.com/thebibleproject).

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