

The Bonfire of the Vanities
“The Pebble in the Shoe”
Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

Introduction

- [Slide #1] All of us. Every single one of us knows the truth of *Finagle's Law of Dynamic Negatives* even if we can't recite the law itself.
- In 1841 a newspaper in **Norwalk, Ohio** printed this poem: “I never had a slice of bread, Particularly large and wide, That did not fall upon the floor, And always on the buttered side.”¹ That's *Finagle's Law*.
- In 1963 **Francis Chisholm**, a professor of English at Wisconsin State College in River Falls, wrote an essay called *The Chisholm Effect* expounding on *Finagle's Law*.
- **First Law.** If anything can go wrong, it will.
Corollary: If anything just can't go wrong, it will anyway.
- **Second Law.** When things are going well, something will go wrong.
Second Law First Corollary: When things just can't get any worse, they will.
Second Law Second Corollary: Anytime things appear to be going better, you have overlooked something.
- **Third Law.** Purposes as understood by the proposer will be misunderstood by others.
Third Law First Corollary: If you explain so clearly that nobody can misunderstand, somebody will.
Third Law Second Corollary: If you do something which you are sure will meet everybody's approval, somebody won't like it.
- You and I know *Finagle's Law* and *The Chisholm Effect* by another name. *Murphy's Law*.
- “Any time you put an item in a ‘safe place’, it will never be seen again.” *Murphy's Law*.
- “Anything dropped in the bathroom will fall in the toilet (or the sink).” I kid you not. Last night the kids are getting ready for their bath and one of their socks ended up in the toilet. *Murphy's Law*.
- *Murphy's Law* says, “A stone in a hiking boot always migrates to the point of maximum pressure.”
- “Anything you try to fix will take longer and cost you more than you thought.”
- “The ‘fast lane’ isn't.”
- “The stock market will go up the day after you sell.”
- “Any wire cut to length will be too short.”
- “Everything you like is bad for you. If it isn't bad for you, it's too expensive. If you can afford it, it's out of season.”
- “The person in front of you will always get the last one.”

¹ www.wikipedia.com, *Murphy's Law*.

- *Murphy's Law. Murphy's Law. Murphy's Law.*

Transition

Life, from birth to death, is nothing but one long series of *Murphy's Law*-like experiences. Frustrations in this life are inevitable. You know what the Bible says? [Slide #2]

Proposition

- **Those frustrations of life are meant to drive us to God**
- There isn't a day that goes by that we aren't frustrated by something. Life always throws us a curveball. People rarely act like you expect them to. Things never turn out the way they're planned. The frustrating pebble in the shoe doesn't go away. It just gets displaced by another pebble.
- I think the reason we have chapters in the Bible like Ecclesiastes 8 is for the simple reason of God reminding us that when things don't turn out as planned, when *Murphy's Law* rears its ugly head, God wants us to turn to him. Those frustrations are meant to drive us to him. Otherwise our experience of life is just as the Teacher describes. *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."*

Transition

Turn to Ecclesiastes chapter 8 if you haven't yet done so. There are in this chapter...

Organizational Sentence

- **Three frustrating experiences that are meant to drive us to God**
- At every turn this chapter we are reminded of our inability to call the tune and master our affairs. "On one level after another we find ourselves pinned down, hunted down and disoriented."² The feeling you and I are meant to feel as we read the Teacher's words here is the feeling of frustration. This chapter is the chapter of unintended consequences. It's *Murphy's Law* Old Testament style. And we are meant to see God in the middle of it.
- See, when you live life as if God is nowhere to be found, as if he doesn't exist or is uninvolved in your life on this earth under the sun, the experience of frustration will always yield resentment; resentment of your circumstances, resentment of your not knowing, of not having, of not finding a solution. You name it. And ultimately if that's the way you live you will eventually become resentful of God. Some of you here this morning are right in that spot.
- The Teacher knows this can happen. And he's trying to warn us so it doesn't get to that point. The constant reminder throughout Ecclesiastes is that there is no meaning in this life apart from God. Life is meant to be lived hand in hand with the God of the Bible who makes all of life meaningful, even the frustrations of life, if we would just let him.
- Listen to how [James Reid](#) puts it. "The way out of life's frustrations is found not by resenting our limitation but by accepting the place of frustration as the sphere of God's purpose."³ God is already working in your life. You just may not see what he's doing. In fact, I want to suggest to you that if you want to see the hand of God you've got to begin looking in the

² Kidner, p. 74.

³ James Reid, *Facing Life with Christ*, (Cokesbury Press, 1940).

right places, in those in between, awkward, limiting, weakness producing, frustrating experiences. He's right there.

Transition

Now to chapter 8. Three frustrating experiences that are meant to drive us to God. The **first** is found in **verses 1-9**. [Slide #3] It's the **frustration produced by a capricious leader**. When I say capricious I mean arbitrary, fickle, erratic. Follow along. Verse 1.

Main Points

- *Who is like the wise man? Who knows the explanation of things? Wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its hard appearance. 2 Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God. 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. 4 Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, "What are you doing?" 5 Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. 6 For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him. 7 Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come? 8 No man has power over the wind to contain it; so no one has power over the day of his death. As no one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it. 9 All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt.*
- In these verses here the Teacher “gives his advice concerning proper behavior in the presence of the king.”⁴ *Obey the king's command, verse 2. Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence, verse 3.* It takes great wisdom to know how to act, to know what to say, what not to say in the presence of authority, whether that be a king or any other kind of leader. *Wisdom puts light in the eyes, And gives gentleness to words and manners.*⁵ In the presence of some great authority you're better off having wisdom in your corner.
- Problem is, you can have all the wisdom in the world and it matters little if you've got an unpredictable king. An unpredictable leader. An unpredictable, inconsistent, erratic, capricious, boss. *Verse 3, Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. 4 Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, "What are you doing?"*
- That phrase, *for he will do whatever he pleases*, governs and jades all of what the Teacher says here about wisdom. Wisdom is great. Wisdom is fabulous. Be as wise as you can as much as much as you can. But if you never now how this king or this leader or this boss is going to react what good is wisdom?
- Have you ever had a boss or a teacher or parent or worked with someone on a committee where you never knew what to do or say in that person's presence? They're like a loaded gun. And you feel like you have to walk on egg shells for fear of setting them off? That's what the Teacher is talking about here. How frustrating is that? In fact the Teacher says in *verse 6, for there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery*

⁴ Longman, p. 211.

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Ecclesiastes 8:1.

weighs heavily upon him. When you've got a capricious leader or boss to deal with its pure misery trying to figure out the proper time and procedure for every matter.

- We've all had the experience of saying just the right thing; doing just the right thing at the right time and having it backfire on us because of the whim of the person above us. The king, the leader, the boss, the teacher who is as unpredictable as the wind or the day of death, [verse 8](#), is one of the great sources of frustration in this life.
- And it is when you most feel this way that you are meant to find God. *I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed,* [Malachi 3:6](#). God does not change like shifting shadows, [James 1:17](#). Unlike a capricious, unpredictable boss or leader or king or parent, you can always count on God. The book of Hebrews says of Christ, he is the *same yesterday and today and forever*.⁶ God always does what he says he's going to do. He isn't capricious. He always fulfills his word. He always keeps his promises. He will be your rock in this life under the sun when everything and everyone around you unpredictably shifts and changes. And if this life is vain and meaningless, full of frustration, then maybe that has more say about you and your lack of trust than who God is. **Life's frustrations are meant to drive you to God.**

Transition

Turn to [verses 10-15](#) and the [second frustration](#) highlighted by the Teacher. [[Slide #4](#)] **The frustration of injustice.** Listen.

- *Then too, I saw the wicked buried--those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless. 11 When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong. 12 Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. 13 Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow. 14 There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. 15 So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun.*
- Few things in this life under the sun are more frustrating than the getting of what is not deserved and the not getting of what is deserved. Injustice stinks. Period.
- Starting in [verse 10](#) the Teacher recounts a number of injustices. His list is not exhaustive. There are others. In [verse 10](#) you've got a dead villain honored and praised by the religious leaders of the community. Not only is that unjust. It's perverse. [Verse 12](#), you've got a wicked man committing a hundred crimes and he still gets Spock's Vulcan salute: live long and prosper. [Verse 14](#). *There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless.*
- All of these things, all of these injustices and whatever we might add to this list, whatever injustices you feel you are facing right now; they're all sources of great frustration to us.

⁶ Hebrews 13:7

And those injustices, over time, like an annoying, grating pebble in the shoe are enough to take you out of the race. Over time those frustrations, those injustices, small though they be, will make you want to give up. Why bother? Why bother doing the right thing? Why bother taking the high road? What's the point?

- The point is—don't give up. You can't give up. Even the Teacher admits in [verse 12](#), that in spite of how things play out, in spite of the frustrations and injustices of this life, he says, *I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God*. God is more than good. And he will one day more than make up for all the injustices in this life.
- I want you to do something. Turn to [Psalm 73](#). I want to read to you the Message paraphrase of Psalm 73 while you follow along in your Bible. Psalm 73 describes Asaph's almost fatal mistake of giving up because of the frustrating injustices of life. Listen to his story.
- ¹⁻⁵ *No doubt about it! God is good— good to good people, good to the good-hearted.
But I nearly missed it,
missed seeing his goodness.
I was looking the other way,
looking up to the people
At the top,
envying the wicked who have it made,
Who have nothing to worry about,
not a care in the whole wide world.*
- ⁶⁻¹⁰ *Pretentious with arrogance,
they wear the latest fashions in violence,
Pampered and overfed,
decked out in silk bows of silliness.
They jeer, using words to kill;
they bully their way with words.
They're full of hot air,
loudmouths disturbing the peace.
People actually listen to them—can you believe it?
Like thirsty puppies, they lap up their words.*
- ¹¹⁻¹⁴ *What's going on here? Is God out to lunch?
Nobody's tending the store.
The wicked get by with everything;
they have it made, piling up riches.
I've been stupid to play by the rules;
what has it gotten me?
A long run of bad luck, that's what—
a slap in the face every time I walk out the door.*
- ¹⁵⁻²⁰ *If I'd have given in and talked like this,
I would have betrayed your dear children.
Still, when I tried to figure it out,
all I got was a splitting headache . . .*

*Until I entered the sanctuary of God.
Then I saw the whole picture:
The slippery road you've put them on,
with a final crash in a ditch of delusions.
In the blink of an eye, disaster!
A blind curve in the dark, and—nightmare!
We wake up and rub our eyes....Nothing.
There's nothing to them. And there never was.*

- ²¹⁻²⁴ *When I was beleaguered and bitter,
totally consumed by envy,
I was totally ignorant, a dumb ox
in your very presence.
I'm still in your presence,
but you've taken my hand.
You wisely and tenderly lead me,
and then you bless me.*
- ²⁵⁻²⁸ *You're all I want in heaven!
You're all I want on earth!
When my skin sags and my bones get brittle,
GOD is rock-firm and faithful.
Look! Those who left you are falling apart!
Deserters, they'll never be heard from again.
But I'm in the very presence of GOD—
oh, how refreshing it is!
I've made Lord GOD my home.
GOD, I'm telling the world what you do!*
- Who are you to give up on God's goodness? And do not be amazed at the injustice of this life. **John 5:28** *"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice 29 and come out--those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.* In the end things will turn out as they should.
- I know that saying that seems like a small consolation when you're in the thick of injustice. And I know that saying "hang in there" sounds trite. But I don't know what else to say. Don't let go of God. God will prove himself sufficiently good. Don't give up hope. **Thomas Merton**, the Trappist monk once said, "To hope is to risk frustration. Therefore, make up your mind to risk frustration."⁷ Not only can God be found in the midst of life's frustrations, more often than not, life's frustrations, should you choose to let them, will reveal the hand of God in your life.

Transition

Look at **verses 16-17**. The **third frustration** meant to drive us to God. [Slide #5] **The frustration of not knowing**. This one is the hardest for me. Follow along.

⁷ Thomas Merton, Trappist monk and writer (1915–1968) Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

- *When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth--his eyes not seeing sleep day or night-- 17 then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.*
- Life is an enigma wrapped in a riddle in the shape of a mystery in the form of a conundrum. The Teacher reminds us that “no one can know the future, not even the wise.”⁸ [Verse 17](#). *No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.* And not knowing is incredibly frustrating, isn't it?
- None of us knows what this week holds. We don't know what this month or this year holds. As hard as we try we simply can't know how things will turn out. We don't know the future. But we try. In fact, some of you are like what the Teacher describes in [verse 16](#), wearing yourself out, your *eyes not seeing sleep day or night* trying to figure things out. Where you'll be a month from now. Who you'll marry. What you're going to do about a job. And in your quest to know, in your frustrating quest to map out the future and figure things out you will lose sight of God. He won't be found. If we take over the reigns of control and try to know all and see all we usurp God's place in our life and he'll remove himself.
- The frustration of not knowing is meant to drive us to God because God reveals himself in the not knowing. Knowing everything means trust is unnecessary. If you know where the money is going to come from to pay the bills you don't have to trust in God to provide. If you know the eventual outcome of the treatment you don't have to trust God in the process. Do you see how this works? We must be content not knowing everything. Stop pretending you've got it all figured out. Those who think they know or continually seek to know will find that life meaningless and vain. Those who realize they don't know, they can't know, those who get to the place where they say “God I don't want to know but I trust you” will see God show up.
- **Deuteronomy 29:29** *The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.* God alone is perfect in knowledge.⁹ All he asks is that you follow and trust him.

Transition

Three frustrations meant to drive us to God. The frustration of a capricious leader. The frustration of injustice. The frustration of not knowing.

Conclusion

- Do you see what the Teacher is doing in this book? The purpose of Ecclesiastes is not to drive us to despair; its purpose is to drive us to God. No one seeks out a mechanic when the car runs well. Life rarely runs well. The repeated, constant reminders in this book that life stinks is the Teachers way of pointing us to God—to the only one who can bring true and lasting meaning to this life under the sun. What in the world are you waiting for?

⁸ Longman, p. 223.

⁹ Job 37:16