

Living Wisely in a Broken World

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Preacher: Dylan Marais

[0 : 00] And as we start our time together, I want us to think a little bit about South Africa, our land. I don't know who you have done much traveling, but if you have, you would have seen it's a beautiful country.

But many people don't get that chance. But it is also a land of contrast. There's so much beauty, and then on the other hand, there's so much ugliness.

When I went around looking to see what we can clean up, gosh, just the piles of dirt. And then I saw, I think, you know, your phone knows everything.

And all my news feeds was of like just mounds of rubbish, but not really in Cape Town. It was all over the country. So we look at our country.

It's contrasting beauty and ugliness, rich and poor. And we get this sort of complicated and mixed feelings about it with beautiful people as well. You've got the African friendliness and humility.

[1 : 01] One of South Africa's strengths is its wide variety of people. The friendliness, humility, exemplified by Sia Khaleesi.

You've got the humor of the Cape Flats of Mensa. I was watching a video by Ema Adams the other day. That guy is so funny and so talented. And then you've got the chillness of the whites.

The whiteys down here in Cape Town are very chill, very relaxed. Everything is cool. Everything is lacquer. Go for a surf. Go for a hike. Go for a sundowner. Just be lacquer, man.

You've got all this mix, all this beauty. But as you take a closer look, South Africa, while it is a beautiful and blessed land, it's got really big problems.

All the way from the corruption of our leaders, the wholesale plunder of every state-owned enterprise, the crime rate that we all know about that makes us prisoners in our own homes, down to the taxis on the roads that drive us mad.

[2 : 04] And so, instead of enjoying this land and being able to develop it to its full potential, we're all sitting worried about our future and about the future of our children.

Elections are coming up. Everyone's talking about what could or couldn't happen in the elections. We all know what we need. We all know that we need a change. And we're all asking things like, well, how do we fix the problems?

How do we fix the problems that are so big when you zoom out and look at them? Is God doing anything? What must my children do?

Should I stay or should I go? Should they stay or should they go? And so, our passage today actually looks at this kind of world that's badly affected by evil and foolishness.

And it gives us plenty to think about in our South African context. Because it seems like Solomon, although he was living all those thousands of years ago, could have been writing about South Africa today.

[3 : 09] And so, the first thing we're going to look at in our passage today is just the reality of living in a broken country. Yes, it's a broken world, but we don't live in the world. We live in South Africa.

And our passage teaches us about the reality of living in a broken country. And one of the things it shows us is that in a broken world, it's easy for bad things to happen to people.

Living in a broken world, it's easy for bad things to happen to people. So, Ecclesiastes 9 and verse 12. Solomon is looking around and he sees some things, sort of topsy-turvy world.

Those first few verses in verse 11. But in verse 12 he says, People are trapped in evil times.

They're just getting on with their life, and then like a fish in the water, they weren't expecting it.

Whoppa! A trap. Boom! Or a bird falls in a snare. He didn't intend for it, but it happened to him.

[4 : 25] People are trapped in evil times. So, we mustn't think that everyone is suffering because of their own bad choices. Many are suffering because of bad things done to them, over which they've

got very little control.

Especially in South Africa. I might have told this story before, but at my time at U-Turn, one of the ladies that we helped, she left home when she was 16.

And she lived on the streets and fell into prostitution because in her early teen years, her mother bailed out her drug dealer who had abused her child so that the mom could get her drug fix.

So, the child's at home, the mom bails the drug dealer boyfriend out, he comes into home, and now what must the girl do? So, she left, she didn't know what to do, didn't have any family backup, and then she turned to prostitution herself.

So, we've got to recognize that because of the fall, we live in a world that is easily overthrown by evil and foolishness. It is prone to fall into sin. It is prone to fall into brokenness.

[5 : 29] In our world, it's much easier to break a thing than to build it or fix it. A lot of good gets overthrown by a very little evil. So, have a look at 10 verse 1.

As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. A little evil overthrows a lot of good.

Anyone who's built a Lego spaceship will know how difficult it is. There's thousands of pieces. And then, or you drop it, or you're worse. Someone trips over it. Boom.

It's all undone. It's very hard to put back together again. Or, more seriously, when something goes wrong with your health. It takes, it always takes longer than you think to get it right.

Sometimes it doesn't come right at all. But here it's teaching that one small bad moral choice can create absolute havoc in people's lives.

[6 : 29] But, we can also take this, take our country as a whole. We've seen, we've all seen inside Africa how shockingly easy it is to undo years, decades, and generations of building capital, building infrastructure, developing our country.

We were the pride of Africa, our electricity. Cheapest in Africa. Largest electrical grid in Africa. All handed on a silver platter to the new South African government.

And, we're just thankful that when there's no load shedding like today, it's lovely. And so that brings us to the issue that we struggle with a lot in South Africa, which is the problem of foolish leadership.

The problem of foolish leadership. Now, I'm not being pejorative by calling people fools in government. I'm not saying that they're stupid. I'm not just saying a rude word.

I'm using a technical term, the biblical word for someone who is caught in sin. Who, not caught in sin as such, but is living a life that isn't aligned with how God has created the world.

[7 : 39] He's not living in wisdom with God's wisdom. He's trying to live in his own wisdom and it just ends in disaster for everyone. Especially when you've got people in leadership, not following God.

God himself, in our text itself says, they're fools. Let's have a look at chapter 10, verse 5 and 7.

Solomon says, there's an evil I've seen under the sun. The sort of error that arises from a ruler.

Those in authority. Fools are put in many high positions while the rich occupy the low ones. I've seen slaves on horseback while princes go on foot like slaves.

So the wrong people are in power and the right people are there at the bottom. Now we didn't quite get to this in our reading, but this whole passage we're actually looking right up to chapter 11.

[8 : 42] You might want to need to turn over your page. I want to show you what it's like to live in a land with a foolish leader. We're still in chapter 10, but look at verse 16 and 17. Chapter 10, 16 and 17.

Woe to the land whose king, whose ruler is a child and whose princes feast in the morning.

Blessed, though, is the land whose king is of noble births and whose princes eat at a proper time for strength and not for drunkenness.

Well, isn't that a perfect description of much of our current government in action? Eating all the time, drinking all the time, at our expense.

So here, Daily Maverick ran an article detailing the 25,000 rands worth of alcohol that four members of one political party went through in one weekend. 25,000 rand.

Those bottles are easily over 1,000 rand each, up to 700, 900, 700, 1,000 bucks each. Nice to live like that.

[9 : 53] Or, actually it wouldn't. Nice to be able to live like that. But that pales in comparison in the hundreds of millions and billions in wasteful expenditure and corruption that has just about brought the country to its knees.

So here's the Auditor General's report from 2021. They've had more recent ones, but this one had a good graphic. And they don't change. Okay, they all look like this.

So you'll see there it says there's 54 billion rand in irregular spending, 18 billion rand in unauthorized spending, 2 billion rand in fruitless and wasteful expenditure, wasteful spending. Now, Helen, you can't complain about how we do things here anymore. Then there's an additional 7 billion in what's called material irregularities, where they overpriced goods, and then there's one little block there where 2 billion rand was spent, where the supplier didn't supply anything. Nothing came in, but the money, 2 billion went out. And so you've got a total of nearly 100 billion rand. Gone, that's for 2021. We all know it's not any better now.

[11 : 15] So Solomon is looking at this. He's like, yeah, guys, this is... It's tough living in a world, in a country, where the leaders do this kind of stuff. It's tough. It's not easy.

And then you've got the question, well, what are we, you and me, supposed to do in the face of such foolish and criminal incompetence?

Well, there's a host of possible solutions or responses, but two stick out that we'll get from this text, which we need to deal with.

Both are attractive and seemingly easy options, but they're not the solutions the Bible says we should take, and are in fact responses of despair and surrender. So while you read Ecclesiastes, what's noticeable is how close Solomon...

He's like, the world is really bad in Ecclesiastes. Okay, it's really, really hard. But he never gives in to despair. Yes, everything is meaningless, but he doesn't say, okay, you know what, just chuck it all. So he doesn't say, the first option is to take your hands off.

[12 : 24] Give up. Can't change anything. Don't look for anything beyond my immediate safety, my immediate security, my immediate comfort and pleasure. Circle the wagons.

We can't change anything. I'm just going to look after myself. That's one option. Another option isn't hands off, but feet leaving. Very attractive option to many South Africans.

We give up. We can't change anything. Go find happiness and an easy and better life somewhere else in the world. Very attractive option for many of our young people. But it's not always a solution God wants us to take.

So let's look at those two possibilities, options for us, and think through them together. The first point is, well, it's really the second point we're making, is God doesn't want us to live with our hands off, but he wants us to get our hands dirty in fixing the problem.

We're not to live with our hands off and leave our country to its own devices. He doesn't want that. That's not a solution for him. He wants us to get our hands dirty. One tempting option, give up, put your hands in the air, put your hands in your pockets, leave politics to the politicians, don't get involved, just live your life as usual, spend hours on your devices, drown yourself in Netflix, in having a good time, looking after your home, not saying you mustn't do all those things, but this is hunkered down, hope it won't affect me, I've got my relationship with God, I've got my relationship with Jesus.

[14 : 00] Billions! What are we supposed to do about that? And anyway, religion has got nothing to say to that. It's just about me and God, not about how this world works out. But actually, in Ecclesiastes, God wants us to get involved.

So we're going to turn to chapter 11, 11 verse 1 and 2, cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days, you will find it again. Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.

So Solomon is looking around him, he knows how bad the world can get when evil rulers are in place, how difficult it is, and he's knocking anything up. Go and do some business.

Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Diversify. But go and do it, because you are going to get a return. So God is calling his people to be involved with the world, not just to let it go to rack and ruin. He wants us to be involved, because he is involved in it. As messed up as it is, God is busy with fixing the problems of this world. And the place where we can see that most clearly, that God gets his hands dirty, is not here in Ecclesiastes, but in the New Testament, in the person of Jesus Christ, in what we call the incarnation.

[15 : 20] God himself sending Christ into the world to fix the problems of the world.

He got his hands dirty for us. In Christ, God makes a decisive statement that he's going to stay involved to undo all the problems of evil and sin and the consequences of foolishness.

1 John 3 says that Jesus came to earth, a place full of evil, to destroy the works of the evil one, of the devil, to undo them.

Works of the devil, there's the sin and the bad things that people do and say to each other. So 1 John 3 verse 8, the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God will continue to sin because God's seed, Christ, the Holy Spirit, his word, remains in them.

They can't go on sinning. They cannot go on sinning because they've been born of God. So because of Jesus, we can't turn a blind eye. We can't put our hands up in the air.

[16:32] We can't say there's no viable solutions. We are called and empowered to dig in and dig deep and work for change. God came here so that we can go out there and do there what God has done for us.

That's traditionally why Christians have found the dirtiest, smelliest, most dangerous, ugly places to reach out and help the weakest, the poorest, the most wretched. And so where can you get your hands dirty?

Well, in your own capacity, look for places where people are finding it difficult to cope with life. You know them. You're one of them. We're all struggling.

But there are other people who are struggling more. Go and offer what you can. You can't solve all their problems. That's okay. You're not called to solve all their problems. But helping a little might mean for them a lot.

Make a start by being with them and offering something that you've got. You can make a start by joining us in the various events and outreaches that we have. We're trying to build this community that goes out there and changes the world.

[17:42] We've been changed. Let's go and do what God has done for us and Jesus has done for us to other people. Join us on our cleanup day. If you haven't even thought about it, nah, I don't know. We pay our rates and taxes.

We pay the city to do this. Why must I go and do it? But here's the thing. We're not living in 1991 or 1987 or 1975. We're living in 2024 where nothing works anymore.

No one else is doing it. Yes. We live in Cape Town. Thank you. It's a blessing to be in Cape Town. But they're struggling. They could use our hope. But it isn't a good thing to go and help them.

Certainly our neighbors will see us. We wear our St. Mark's crew shirts. They're like, oh, Christians are actually doing stuff. not just singing and asking us for money. Giving food and time for our soup kitchen.

We need a bit more food, by the way. It's okay. We've got people giving, which is great. Maybe you want to help at Latimer House. We've been planning on what to do with it, but we've got a plan for it.

[18:49] We're busy developing it into a place that can help children at risk with a safe and peaceful environment and learn some life lessons. But you'll hear more about that in due course.

But that'll be a lovely way for us to get involved and help people that really do need it in our community. So, the first thing. I think it's point number two.

We've got to get our hands dirty as Christians because of what Jesus has done, the incarnation. We can't put our hands in our pockets and just do nothing about the world around us. We have to get involved and get our hands dirty. But it's actually fun to do that because we get to change things if you do that.

Otherwise, it's going to stay the same and it won't act. We think it'll stay the same. It's not going to stay the same. It's going to get worse. It is getting worse. We actually have to fight hard, hard to keep South Africa from going down.

And if it's not us, who's going to do it? So then the next point is not leaving but staying put, what we do with our feet. But the problems are big, let's be honest, and our country is dangerous, especially as our leaders are less and less Christian and so it's more tempting to not stay and fight but to get up and leave.

[20:04] Very tempting. But our passage, and I think the gospel, doesn't want us to give up easily and leave when the going gets tough. Rather, to tough it out with Christ who gives us the strength to bear up under evil leadership longer than we think we are able to.

We'll look at the New Testament passage in a second. But for now, if you're still in Ecclesiastes, turn to chapter 10, verse 4. If a ruler's anger rises against you, take a runner.

It's not worth staying. Okay, so it doesn't actually say that. If a ruler's anger, not his pleasure, his anger rises against you, do not leave your post.

But calmness can lay great offenses to rest. Now, you know it's biblical wisdom when it seems at first glance counterintuitive.

When someone gets angry, often the first thing you want to do is leave. Especially if it's the leaders of the country who don't want you there. But, you know, this is actually very helpful wisdom.

[21 : 08] It can be used at home, in the workplace, and at the national level. It's here talking about kings, a ruler. But any authority over you. When your mom and dad rises up in anger against you, just remain calm.

Chill, dad. I don't know if that, be careful how you say that. But act in a calm way. Don't retaliate and make the problem worse. By your head, I messed up, how can I fix it?

That's in the home. In the workplace as well. But also in our country. Like many other proverbs, this one is saying that when someone in authority comes against you, even if it's unfairly, even if you didn't do the thing that made them angry with you, don't retaliate like with like.

Don't pour fuel on the fire. Do the opposite. Remain calm. Remain in place. Practice what the police call de-escalation. You know what that is? Bringing the thing down.

Don't join them and go up. You're not going to win. Remain calm. Often de-escalates the situation. Now it's hard to do remaining in place and being calm when someone is up in your face and our sinful nature wants to fight back harder and stronger than they're coming at us.

[22 : 24] But just think how silly you would look if every time your parents were angry at you, you decided to leave. It doesn't work.

or every time your boss was upset with you. You know what? I'm out of here. I'm not working with you. And another thing. And another thing. Oh my goodness. You can't live like that. You can't up and leave every single time.

Now, before we continue, I just want to be clear what I'm not saying. It sounds like I'm saying this, but I'm not saying you have to stay in South Africa. I wish I could make us all stay.

It's not up to me. I'm not saying you have to stay. As Christians, just as people, we have a certain amount of freedom about where we live our lives as we see God's calling on it.

But this text, and God, is saying that you need to think long and hard about jumping ship. Because it's going to be wiser and better for South Africa if Christians stay and make a difference, even in the face of stiff opposition.

[23 : 35] how is it that we can do this? Well, it's because of Christ who did it for us. Peter writes, if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.

If you suffer for doing good and endure it, God likes it. totally counterintuitive. But it's a bit like a dad when his kid is struggling with something.

You know, the first time you teach them how to ride a bike or surf or moms when you're teaching your kids how to cook. I don't quite know how that works, but you burn yourself. But nevertheless, the point is, he's struggling.

He's struggling. But he pushes through. Come on, boy. You can do it. You can do it. Hey, well done. Hey, you didn't give up. Well done. It's like that with us. Enduring suffering.

Verse 21, to this you were called. You were called to this as a Christian because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.

[24 : 49] Well, he committed no sin. No deceit was found in his mouth. Why did they, why did they catch him out? He didn't deserve it. When they hurled their insults at him, he didn't retaliate.

When he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. So friends, Jesus is the living embodiment of that verse in Ecclesiastes 10, verse 4.

If a ruler rises against you, don't leave your post because calmness can lay great offenses to rest. Imagine who we would be if Jesus decided to up and leave in a huff because he was being unfairly treated.

No thanks. I didn't do this. I didn't ask for this. You guys sort it out. Imagine in a world where no Christianity existed for 2,000 years and the little bit of joy and peace and goodness we've got, it's not there.

Imagine how tough life would be then. But because he stayed and trusted in God, he started something that changed the world. And friends, you can do the same.

[26 : 01] You can stay longer than you think you can. You can tough it out longer than you think you can. If you trust in God the same way that Jesus did. Because if God calls you to do something, you were called for this, he's going to empower you to be able to do it.

He's not going to leave you powerless. But it takes faith in what God is saying here. You've got to trust him because it's going to feel like pain and it is going to be painful. But goodness, so much goodness flows out when you just keep going on and sticking it out further than you think you can. Instead of retaliating or leaving, we can stay and work for the peace and prosperity of our country. So just in closing, like Christ, we need to plant our flag in this world.

The incarnation is God planting the flag, the banner of Jesus into the world and says, this is now mine. This world now belongs to the kingdom of God and we need to do the same for South Africa. South Africa needs Christians who are going to plant their flags, stake their lives to the death if necessary to live and fight and die for this land and his people. Jesus did that for us.

[27 : 17] How can we do anything less for him, for the people of this country or for this country? Should we ask him for help? Let's pray. Lord Christ, it's a high calling to live in a country that doesn't want us necessarily.

We're not quite there yet, Lord, but you could easily get there. Lord, you suffered needlessly and to the most extreme for us.

Help us to get our hands dirty. Help us to plant our feet in the gospel and slowly but surely make a change to our country. Amen.

Amen.