

The Earthy Piety of Providence

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[0:00] We're doing a couple things this morning. Simultaneously, we're beginning to wrap up our time in the book of Ecclesiastes, and we're also beginning to celebrate the 25th year of Providence as a church.

The piety of Providence, the earthy piety of Providence. As you might guess, Providence has a double meaning here. First of all, again, we celebrate the 25 years that this church has existed, and we also, with using the word Providence, have this thought process of God's provision and care in our lives.

Now, this, I think, is the right way to end our time in Ecclesiastes, because if you'll remember, when we began this series, we noted that the writer of Ecclesiastes is running an experiment to determine what is a human supposed to do in the life that we live in, in reality as we know it.

And he stipulates this in a number of places, but in Ecclesiastes 2.3, he says it very clearly. I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine, my heart still guiding me with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the days of their life.

That's the experiment being run in the book of Ecclesiastes. What is a human supposed to do? What does a life well-lived look like?

[1:52] And as he engages in his investigation, he finds that there is a layer of what he calls vanity over everything. And I think that as we get near the end of the book, we could say that vanity is this idea that something is fleeting, but also that there's just this layer of uncertainty on everything in this world, even sometimes a layer of unfairness on everything in this world.

He really locks in on this question of fairness and certainty in chapter 9. Look at verse 1 of Ecclesiastes 9. But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God, whether it is to love or hate, man does not know, both are before him. It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner. And he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil, and all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to them all.

He repeats this complaint again in verse 11 of the same chapter. He says in verse 11 of chapter 9, Again, I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.

[3:37] And now he paints a word picture that humanity, human living is like being a fish in the sea. Everything seems fine, and then one day, you notice this thing drawing in on you, and it's a net.

And before you can realize what's happening to you, it's done. Verse 12, For man does not know his time, like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare.

So the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them. So this is his observation throughout his experiment, throughout every single chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes, life is uncertain and seems unfair.

Now, he has realized this, and now he still has to answer the question that he set out with, and that is, what are we supposed to do? What does life come down to?

How are we supposed to live? And he begins to stipulate four categories of a good life that we'll walk through over the next three weeks.

[4:50] Those four categories I'm calling work. There are, my goodness, I've got all the verses here. Dozens of verses on work in the book of Ecclesiastes.

Wine, also dozens of verses. Wife, and worship. Those are the four categories that he says make up a good life.

Work, this is a category now, don't get too literal. Toil, effort. Maintaining, resisting entropy.

Investing in the future through sowing in tears and reaping in joy.

Work, broadly speaking. It's one of the things that makes a good human life. Two, wine. What he means by wine, and we'll see this here in a moment, is all lawful pleasures, lawfully engaged in, but I would almost call it, the writer of Ecclesiastes wholeheartedly commends a kind of micro-dosing of celebration where you crown each day as another day that God has made and as another day that you're glad that God has given you.

So wine serves a celebratory function in not only Ecclesiastes, but throughout God's Word. By wife, we mean spouse, but also companions.

[6:12] People to work alongside, to be committed to, and share with. And finally, worship, we mean worshiping God as the one who knows the answers to all of the questions we do not know.

And I would say that it's important probably to add that in Ecclesiastes, worship is really almost always described as the fear of God. And we use the fear of God definition from Joel Beeky last week, which just to remind you, Beeky writes, to fear the Lord is to be deeply aware that everything I do, say, and think, or fail to do and say, is open to the all-seeing eyes of God, my Creator, Father, and Judge, and therefore to be genuinely concerned to live in such a way as to please Him and keep my conscience clear before Him.

And really, worship is the attitude we have while we do these other things. It's the attitude we have toward God as we live our lives. It's the atmosphere that we live in as we engage in these activities. Anyway, the preacher gives us these four categories over and over again in Ecclesiastes, side by side to his observation that life is full of uncertainty and unfairness. He says, these are the things. These are the things we must be about. Ecclesiastes 5.18. Sometimes he mentions things partially. He doesn't go through the full list all the time. In fact, very rarely does he go through the whole list.

[7:39] But Ecclesiastes 5.18, he says, Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting, he's answering his question from chapter 2, what should man be about? What I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot.

Ecclesiastes 12 is more of a worship-focused reminder, but all the categories exist there as well.

Ecclesiastes 12.13, let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter, fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man, for God shall bring every work into judgment with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.

But in our chapter today, he lists the full inventory. Look at chapter 9 again, verse 7 through 10. Go, eat your bread with joy.

Drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments always be white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.

Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

[9:01] Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in shoal to which you are going. So in all of his uncertainty, and he has, by the way, more uncertainty about the end of things than we do, this much further into the story of the Bible, the preacher of Ecclesiastes wasn't clear what happened when a person died.

That revelation continued progressively through the time of Jesus and into the New Testament. But he looks at all of the uncertainty and all the unfairness, and he says, listen, here's what you have to do.

This is what a good life is. You have to work. You have to enjoy little pleasures. You have to connect and commit to somebody and share your life with them.

And you have to worship God while you do those things. That's what the book of Ecclesiastes is commending. I think that's why we ought to end our time in Ecclesiastes and start our celebration of Providence's 25 years in this section, because we here at Providence do indeed believe in what I would describe as an earthy piety, a simple, common, quiet, ordinary life of faithfulness in the little things linked together day after day and year after year.

That's the vision of discipleship at Providence. Now, let's make sure we handle this text carefully, because we're going to be moving off on, we're going to be building on top of it for the next few weeks.

[10:40] Let's make sure we understand just how important this first thing I said was. I love that. Just realize I'm saying important things, guys.

Let's make sure we don't gloss over this idea of uncertainty and unfairness. It's massive in the book, and I want to make sure we give it fair treatment. He is locked into this throughout the past, throughout the book.

It's like this troubling way that life doesn't work out the way that you thought it was going to be, the troubling brevity of life, the uncertainty of life, the unfairness of life.

I spent a little bit of intellectual side quest this week studying psychological data about uncertainty. And the reason why I was interested in that is I have noticed, you know, leading things for a long time, that different people react to its uncertainty in different ways.

And I wondered had there ever been any kind of study of that. Sure enough, so much study that there's actually an abbreviation that's used in the literature, and that abbreviation is IU.

[11:52] And IU stands for intolerance of uncertainty. Okay? So there's been a lot of research on this, it turns out. And I just want to tell you, there's like generally, kind of across all the literature, that I could see, you know, four categories.

The first person freezes in the face of uncertainty. Uncertainty paralyzes them. The more open loops and open tabs and question marks exist in their mind, the stiller they get, the less certain they are on how to proceed.

It causes some to seize, which this is a funny category, and I've certainly met this person. I think I was this person, honestly, until I got older.

But the seize people, they hate uncertainty so much, they grab some evidence and overwork it into an explanatory theory over everything, and then we'll defend it until they die.

You know? And that's, and really it's, they have an intolerance of uncertainty. So they grab evidence and they, you know, I think that this is absolutely what I've grown out of to some degree, but still struggle with to some degree.

[12:57] And so I have to depend on the Holy Spirit to help me when I'm doing this. Fretting. When they get into the face of uncertainty, they just ruminate.

They just wonder, like what, they just worry. You know, they have anxiety and anxiousness and so forth. And then this is the person I'm trying to become more like to some degree, and that is, there is a kind of person in the face of uncertainty that just says, well, this is fun, let's explore it.

And they are positively stimulated by uncertainty, but of course that has a backlash as well because you will find yourself manufacturing crisis and areas of uncertainty and intentionally opening loops just because you like the stimulus of the unknown.

And I can hear my oldest daughter saying, Dad, that's totally you right now in her head. We're mind melded sometimes. Anyway, so those are the four things that I saw when I did this little side quest on this whole idea.

I didn't know there was such a thing as intolerance of uncertainty. And I kind of intuitively knew that certain people respond to uncertainty in certain ways, but, you know, learned that, yeah, that's actually also well studied.

[14:09] A preacher is saying that none of those are ideal and none of those are really a life. I think that's a really good point. None of those, some more positive than others, but none of those constitute an actual life.

That's just a reaction to something. That's not a proactive vision. And so, he promotes these four categories as the proper response to uncertainty.

These are things that I would challenge you young people, well, really everybody, that, listen, if you're holding off on pursuing one of these W's because of uncertainty, you're missing the prescription that the preacher's giving.

He's saying these are actually prescriptions for uncertainty, not things you hold off on until you get perfect clarity. Okay? So, he also is able to do this.

This is huge. He's able to say, you know what, yeah, life is weird, it's uncertain, who knows what's going on, because he doesn't believe that that is true of fundamental reality. In fact, his first move when he talks about the uncertainty of life is to let you and I both know that it appears uncertain to us, but the world is not actually running loose.

[15:28] It looks like it is from the place that we stand, and where we stand is actually the issue. We are creatures. We see a small piece of a very large thing, a very small piece of a pattern can

sometimes look like no pattern at all.

So, what I want you to understand is that when he ignites uncertainty, he does not acknowledge it in the way that an atheist would, who believes that everything really is just chance and randomness, or a pagan who believes that there is always this big Donnybrook, sorry, that's a fight for you young people.

There's always this fight between all these deities, and we don't know how things are going to play out because we don't know who's going to win the fight today. Joy Davidman, C.S. Lewis' wife, she wrote a book called *Smoke on the Mountain*, and it's all about the Exodus, and she deals with this competition of worldviews that was happening when monotheism emerged, you know, in some ways through Moses and intruded itself upon the pagan perceptions of the Egyptians, and she does a marvelous job.

I'd like to tell you, just go get that book just to read that little section. That's a pretty good book in general, actually. So, paganism believes in a kind of true randomness because we don't know who's going to win the fight between the pantheon.

Epicureanism is really kind of built on this. In fact, a lot of what I talk about and how I talk sounds like an Epicurean, but the distinction is I'm telling you to go live the good life and embrace the simple and embrace your friends, not because the world is truly random, but because it's above your pay grade.

[17:05] And so, Epicureanism would say, no, it's totally, it's totally off or unpredictable at a fundamental level. The preacher's not saying that. Existentialism, it's like the universe is silent, it's up to us to impose meaning on it.

Christianity doesn't believe that the world is truly random, but we do acknowledge that from our creaturely perspective, it really feels like it is. A lot. And a lot of the inputs that we think would lead to certain things don't.

And it's confusing. It often feels unfair. Look back at chapter 8. I didn't lead you all the way through this the first time, but he really nails it in chapter 8, 16, going into chapter 9.

Look at verse 16 of chapter 8. When I applied my heart to know wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth and how neither day or night do one's eyes sleep, then I saw all the work of God that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun.

However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out even though a wise man claims to know he cannot find it out. Verse 1 of chapter 9. But all this I laid to heart examining it, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God.

[18:19] The universe is not truly random, but man, it sure feels that way. The uniquely Christian perspective is to acknowledge that it feels that way, but again, we are neck deep in a religion that emphasizes facts over feelings.

And so we would say, yeah, it feels that way, but God is actually in control. And because God is actually in control, we can start thinking differently about how to process the uncertainty and the randomness, which leads me to the next section, which is what I refer to as the Augustinian heat map.

What if I told you that before all the chaos of 2020, a study was published in a prominent journal that predicted all the conditions for the chaos itself and also all the massive ideological splits that we observed?

Well, in 2019, a team of psychologists led by Adam Waits, Jonathan Haight was also on this team if you've ever read any of his writings, they produced a journal or produced a study where they went to people that were self-identifying as conservative, self-identifying as liberal, and they said, we will give you a hundred credits of care, a budget of a hundred credits of care, and you have to spend these on stuff, on this chart.

And the chart was family, city, you know, and it moved itself outward to, like, universal rights, to, you know, things like all the way out in space.

[20:00] And so, the liberals took their credits and they placed them down on their concentric circle, and the conservatives took their credits and placed them on their concentric circle, and what we wound up with, I think we have a slide for it, so the one on the left is, the conservatives placed most of their credits in the center on their actual family, on their actual community, on their actual city.

And liberals reliably placed their emphasis, their credits of care, on the exterior of this. Now, that's interesting, but I would say that I know so many Christians who live with this one on the right. In fact, I would say anybody here who went through a college ministry was probably led by somebody who had a broken concentric care circle and were overly focused on missions and ministry out there to the expense of just, like, dressing well, getting your finances in order, and showing up to work on time, like, just the basics.

I think that most Christians here that went through campus ministries, even if those campus ministries were really strong, those were usually led by people with a non-biblical level of commitment to the way that God tells us to live our life.

God tells us to live our life focused on those things which are most immediate to us. And I bring this up not to bash on liberals. I don't even think it's consistent across liberals and conservatives.

[21:35] I think the categories are different. I bring this up because, in reality, what Ecclesiastes is doing is he's saying, no, the one on the left is right. That's the correct version. And that's because you don't have the ability to take care of everything.

You're a creature. You have a limited ability to love. And therefore, you must focus on those things which are in proximity to you. And the reason I call it Augustinian is because long before all of this ever happened, when Augustine was writing on Christian doctrine, he says this, all men are to be loved equally but since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special regard to those who, by the accidents of time or place or circumstance, are brought into closer connection with you.

He doesn't mean accidents in the real fundamental way. He means it in the providential way. But he's saying, you don't have unlimited abilities to think about things, to love them, to tend to them, to care for them, and so you have to focus on those things that are most proximate to you.

And that's the preacher's answer to the perceived uncertainty. He keeps bringing us back to our house. He keeps bringing us back to our meals, to our worship, to our walk with God, to our spouse, to the people we've committed to, to our church.

He keeps bringing us back there. Now, there is an antitype to this in the Bible, and I think it's worth talking about, and that antitype is known in the New Testament as the busybody.

[23:18] And I think we should talk about the busybody at least for a second, because it's the opposite of what the preacher is telling us to do, and it's something we can fall into quite often.

In 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul tells the people there to aspire to live quietly and to mind your own affairs and to work with your hands as we instructed you so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

Aspire. This is where your ambition ought to go. That's the word for aspire. Make it your ambition to live quietly and to mind your own affairs and to work with your hands as we instructed you.

That's the positive vision of what the preacher's saying. Now the negative vision comes up in something Peter writes, and he says this in chapter 4 of his first epistle.

Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a busybody. And the term for busybody there is the term for bishop, and it literally means, it's a compound word, it literally means stop making yourself the bishop over things that don't concern you.

[24:35] Stop making yourself the overseer of things that don't concern you. And notice the company that the busybody keeps. Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a bishop over someone else's affairs.

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul writes, we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busy bodies. In the Greek, that's a pun. He says essentially in the Greek, not working, but working around working.

Working in other people's work. Working in other people's business. And Proverbs 26, back to the wisdom literature, says it this way, whoever meddles in a quarrel, not his own, is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears.

So if you do the opposite of what Ecclesiastes is commending, you're going to be one of those people terminally online, for instance, and you're going to know a lot about politics and you're going to know a lot about this, a lot about that, while your own home and your own relationships are probably not as well maintained.

The reality is that the preacher and the whole council of God's word is aware that there is a tendency of pride in the human heart to try to use our brain outside of our pay grade, and that there are various motivations for this, but I think we probably all know that there's usually a person whose own house has fallen into some disorder and that situation at home or in their heart is so

unattended and so sad and so hard that the only relief available is to look out the window and find some other household to critique.

[26 : 24] Managing someone else's household becomes much easier than managing theirs. And then there is the metaphysical version of that where the metaphysical busybody spends his time trying to get into God's business.

Auditing accounts he was never given access to, demanding to know why the man prospers and why this one suffers. Running heaven's books, running a heavenly audit on the work of God and why God, why?

Go home, get back to work, drink a little wine, be good to your spouse and worship God. That's the message of earthy piety.

Put down what isn't yours and pick up what is and do the best you can with it with all your might. What I find so interesting about the conclusions of this experiment in the book of Ecclesiastes is that the preacher is running this audit, figuring out what man should do and I think what he finally winds up seeing is that there is a lot of fallout from the fall of mankind.

A lot of fallout from the fall of mankind. The world he observes is not fundamentally the way it's supposed to be. With that in mind, pay careful attention to the conclusion that he reaches.

[27 : 55] The world is broken. What are we supposed to do? And here's what I find him doing which is amazing. He says, man should do these four things. They should walk with God worshipfully.

They should do some work. They should be kind to the people God's put in their lives and they should crown each day with a little sip of joy. Over and over and over again he does that. Now here's what is crazy to me is he essentially rediscovers basic human programming that is described precisely in the first three chapters of Genesis.

He runs the experiment what should a man do and what does he find after his careful investigation that a man should do what a man was made to do in the first place and that a woman should do what a woman was supposed to do in the first place.

In other words all of the uncertainty and difficulty and brokenness of the world the way that it feels random the way that it feels unfair it doesn't deter us and should not deter us from our fundamental programming we received when we were created out of the dirt.

Worship God. Do your work. Celebrate the little things and be faithful to the people God has given you. back in 2001 in October of 2001 I was in New York City probably a little more than a month after the towers came down in lower Manhattan and there was a layer of dust over everything the rubble was still smoldering and everybody on the subway and as I walked past them on the sidewalk had a dazed look in their eyes.

[29 : 48] The wound was still really fresh and the thing that I think was most impactful to me when I was there was the layer of dust and how far that dust extended from the original site very far up into the island of Manhattan.

I think after studying Ecclesiastes extensively for this series I would say that the preacher is surveying a place that has kind of been struck by original sin.

He's surveying the world as it is now that sin and death have entered the world. He's surveying a cursed world and he sees the layer of dust on everything.

It's like a bomb went off which you know really metaphysically speaking probably speaking in every sense that's what the fall of man was. It was it was a bomb that went off and literally wrecked everything to one degree or another.

And I think that the writer the preacher in Ecclesiastes is surveying all of this fallout and all this dust and you know what he winds up saying? This is I think this is just such a key phrase men if you're leading your homes.

[31 : 06] You know what he winds up concluding? Kind of I think accidentally. Here's the phrase do Eden anyway. Do Eden anyway.

Is it harder? Yeah. The word for work is now toil. it's all harder. It all takes more faith and more patience and more grit.

But who we are has not changed as human beings and the way to live a good life has not changed in spite of all the hardship that surrounds us. The end of the day the preacher concludes this is what it is to be a human.

This is what you should do with the days of your life. Yes, death and despair and uncertainty have entered the world. Yes, there's a layer of vanity on everything, but none of that changes what you are and what you are for.

Do Eden anyway. Do your work. Walk with your God. Love the people God put in your life. crown each day with the celebration of the fruit of your labor.

[32 : 30] So that's the explanation and introduction to the series. When I say the earthy piety of providence, I mean earthy and not earthly. Those are two different words and the Bible treats them very differently.

Earthy is a word the New Testament always uses to describe something sinful. James says there is a wisdom that is earthly and unspiritual and demonic and Paul describes the enemies of the cross as those who have their minds set on earthly things.

And I think that the church has done a very good job preaching against earthliness but perhaps at the expense of earthiness which is actually commended throughout God's word.

Earthy means that you and I are creatures. The word Adam comes from the word dirt. we are creatures. We are made to exist on a relatively brief timeline in this life anyway.

And earthy means bread and wine and oil and a clean shirt and someone to share it with. There's an error on each side of this earthy earthly continuum.

[33 : 42] You've got the earthly man who has only dirt and no God but then you've got the heavenly man who has no earthiness to him at all. He's well read.

He has all sorts of esoteric ideas but his house needs new gutters. When we talk about piety at providence it's not just some abstract concept.

We mean godliness that shows up in your ordinary life. The old word for piety, pietas, it was never meant to be a mood. It was meant to be faithfully discharging your duties.

Faithfully embracing your portion. And of course by providence we mean two things. The first is doctrine. Every good catechism discusses providence in one way in particular.

It is God's works that are most holy and wise and powerful and preserving and governing all of his creatures and all their actions. We believe the word providence is very important.

[34 : 53] It comes from the Latin provider which means to see and advance. God knows us. He knows where our road is headed and we can take each day at a time, not freezing, not seizing, not fretting.

we can just take each day at a time because our God has provided for us. Which takes us to the second meaning of the word providence.

That's our church's name and it was our church's name and I just want to tell you the story in a few sentences. The people who, the families who founded this church were all sort of turned on to the sovereignty of God in its fullest sense, its biblical framing and relatively the same period of time.

And they had all been Christians for a while but this idea that God was totally in control and that he was good and needed nothing from us, that he was our creator and we are his creatures, this was the central heartbeat of the original families that founded this church.

And the reason that providence is the name is because this was glorious to them and to be honest undeniable to them and needed to be acted upon.

[36 : 15] And we're sitting in an environment that came out of an embracing of that doctrine. So yeah, this sermon is a way of initiating, like honestly, a series of pretty great celebrations, not over this family or that family or this worker, that worker, this pastor or that pastor, but over this God who linked all of the days of faithfulness, link after link after link, to make a thing that's been around for two and a half decades.

One of the best lines, one of the most provoking lines in that passage in Ecclesiastes is, he says, for God has already approved what you do. I'm thinking, well, preacher, how do you know that? How do you know that God's already approved what you do? And I'm convinced that, you know, at least some of the time, the writers of Scripture have no idea what they're really saying, or have one sense, and it's not the sense.

But I, of course, immediately started thinking about the approval of God, and I want to pivot your attention to our celebration of communion by reminding you of one of the core scriptures at our church.

Proverbs, Ephesians, or sorry, Ephesians chapter two. And you were dead in your trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power

of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind.

[37:57] But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

By grace you have been saved, and he raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. faith, and this not of your own doing, it is a gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

And listen to verse 10. It's almost like Paul's looking back at Ecclesiastes 9. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

And then if we were to skip forward to the end of Ephesians, we'd see that those good works are what, guys? Love your wife sacrificially.

[39:03] Honor your husband. Raise your children in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Work hard with your hands so that you have something to give others. Be kind and tenderhearted to one another.

Children, obey your parents as unto the Lord. Workers, obey your masters as unto the Lord. children. It's almost like this is what it means to be a human enjoying and living in the will of God. We worship him through our work. We worship him through our celebration. We worship him through the people we have been given to care for. And God is good.

And God has been good to us. Let's pray. Let's pray. Thank you.