

Ecclesiastes: Chasing Meaning
Justice: Human vs Divine, Ecclesiastes 8
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Who is like the wise?

And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

A man's wisdom makes his face shine,

and the hardness of his face is changed.

² I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him. ³ Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. ⁴ For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, "What are you doing?" ⁵ Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. ⁶ For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. ⁷ For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? ⁸ No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. ⁹ All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt.

¹⁰ Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. ¹¹ Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. ¹² Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. ¹³ But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

¹⁴ There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. ¹⁵ And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

¹⁶ When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, ¹⁷ 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.

- Ecclesiastes 8, ESV

When What We Know Conflicts with What We See

Things aren't always what they appear to be. This truth has been used by numerous novels and movies, whether it's Professor Lockhart, who appears to be one of the greatest wizards in the Harry Potter world before he's

exposed as a fraud or Chancellor Palpatine, who fooled the Jedi for years before being exposed as the Sith Lord, Darth Sidious. But the best exploration of this theme in literature is probably *Pride and Prejudice*, where Lizzy Bennett learns the cost of her tendency to rush to judgment when Wickham is exposed as an evil, selfish manipulator and Darcy turns out to be a man of impeccable character and incredible generosity.

In the world of books and movies, the disconnect between how things appear and how they actually are can be fun fodder for character development and plot advancement. Unfortunately, in the real world, disconnects between the way things appear and the way they are can be quite painful, a shock to our system and a challenge to our faith. You see, all we ever see or know in this life is only how things appear to us; we never see or know things as they actually are – that’s in God’s hands and seen from His perspective only. Meanwhile, we have to deal with what’s in front of us – what we can see. Ecclesiastes helps us navigate that tension without losing either our faith or our sanity.

You may have noticed that Ecclesiastes 8 opens with a statement of the necessity and benefits of wisdom, and then closes with a statement of the limits of human wisdom. This tension – extolling the virtues of something and then explaining how it has only limited value – is all part of how Ecclesiastes helps us find perspective in life under the sun.

A. The Realities & Limits of Human Justice, vv. 1-9

Part of what we see and deal with in this world is human government and human justice, which calls for wisdom –

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In the opening section of chapter 8, Solomon is giving us practical wisdom for how to deal with kings and matters of human justice, while fully acknowledging the limitations and frustrations of such things in this life. The Bible clearly calls us to submit to and honor our rulers, and not just here in Ecclesiastes 8. Romans 13:1-4 says,

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good.”

1 Peter 2:17 puts it even more succinctly: *“Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.”*

Verse 2 of Ecclesiastes 8 is giving pretty much the same guidance as we find in these other verses: *“Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him.”* God has made the king the king, and so we should honor the king and keep his command. But then, verses 3-6 are giving us further practical real-life advice of how to handle things if we disagree with the king. Verses 3-4 tell us what NOT to do and why: *“Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, ‘What are you doing?’”* Kings in the ancient world had nearly absolute power, so disagreeing with the

king could be a very risky thing to do; you don't storm out or join in a rebellion against the king, if you value your life.

Verses 5-6 then begin to give advice on what **can** be done: *"Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him."* Solomon advises us to go ahead and carry out the king's command, even if you don't agree with it, and instead look for the proper time and the just way to be able to persuade the king to do otherwise, and although something may seem very urgent and troubling, it's best to be patient and wait for the right opportunity to deal with things wisely and righteously.

Now, we don't have a king in America, and we don't serve in the royal court, like Solomon's audience, but most of us do have bosses, or we have to deal with people in authority with whom we disagree. The wise thing to do is to exercise self-control, be submissive to the authorities God has placed over us, don't be hasty or rebellious, but instead patiently look for the opportunity to do or say the right thing at the right time to try to make things better.

We have to limit our expectations, and not be angry or frustrated when we're put in a position where we have to live with foolishness or injustice. Such are the realities of life in a fallen world "under the sun." That's what verses 7-9 are doing, helping us keep things in perspective and understand our limitations:

⁷ For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? ⁸ No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. ⁹ All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt.

This last clause is an especially revealing close to this section: Yes, under the sun, human beings often have power over one another and choose to use that power to hurt one another. "When man had power over man to his hurt" – We might ask, "to whose hurt" and Solomon might respond – "Both, of course!" The most insightful Christian critiques of slavery in the 1800's emphasized that slavery was an institution that destroyed both slave and master, dehumanizing both. Similarly, today, human trafficking obviously victimizes the young women who are trafficked, but it also hurt those who do the trafficking and those who are "customers" of this awful, despicable commerce. And every abortion kills an unborn child and scars the mother of that child in deep and often unseen ways for the rest of her life. We should love them both.

B. Death & the Reality of Divine Justice, vv. 10-13

Verse 8 tells us *"No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death,"* That sets us up for the next section of chapter 8, which deals with death. Death transfers human beings from the temporary and very imperfect realm of human justice to the eternal and perfect world of divine justice:

¹⁰ Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. ¹¹ Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. ¹² Though a sinner does evil a hundred times

and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. ¹³ But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

Verse 10 is full of contradictions: “The wicked buried” is itself a contradiction. Burial is a sign of honor and respect – both the act of giving someone a burial and the location of that burial were tremendously significant in ancient Israel. Earlier, in Ecclesiastes 6:3, we read of how tragic it would be if a man had a hundred children and yet did not receive a burial. Here, the wicked is being buried, and this is not hypothetical; this is something Solomon saw. Even more, in life, this wicked person “used to go in and out of the holy place” - so they had a reputation for piety and devotion to worship, even though they were, in fact, a wicked person.

Why do such wicked people outwardly prosper in life and even get decent burials? It’s a symptom of a lack of justice in this world. If justice is delayed or corrupted, it encourages wickedness to flourish: “*Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.*”

And yet, while this is so often the reality of life under the sun, it is not the final word on justice. In verse 12, Solomon uses an unusual expression for Ecclesiastes. He speaks of something he knows, not something he has seen or observed or something he considers – all of which are more common expressions in Ecclesiastes. He says “Yet I know.” Despite all that he sees and all that he observes and what one might think to conclude based on the visible evidence, Solomon says “yet I know” – “*Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.*”

Notice that the wicked are not here contrasted with the righteous but with those who fear God. For human beings living life under the sun, righteousness remains elusive, relative and imperfect at best. Remember the words of 7:20: “*Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.*” Yet there are those who fear God. And Solomon says, “*I know that it will be well with those who fear God*” and “*It will not be well with the wicked . . . because he does not fear God.*” All the efforts of the wicked to prolong his days are just efforts to lengthen a shadow; it is not real, and it will not last.

This turns out to be part three of Solomon’s response to the reality that, in this life under the sun, we often do see the wicked prolonging their lives, prospering, and even being buried, while we often see the righteous suffering unjustly and dying young. Part one of Solomon’s response to this observed reality was that the prosperity of the wicked does not really benefit them. Part two was to declare that there are no righteous, innocent people. Now, part three is a confident assertion of Solomon’s knowledge that divine justice will, in fact, settle accounts in the end.

Some believers don’t like the idea of divine justice for the wicked, of God settling accounts, of the coming Judgment Day, because it brings up the uncomfortable topic of the wrath of God and sounds very heavy and

offensive. But divine justice is central to Solomon's resolution of the problem of the upside down and unjust nature of life in our world.

C. Transformational Realities, vv. 14-17

In fact, right after stating his confident knowledge of divine justice, Solomon comes right back to this troubling issue:

1. Yes, Things are Often Upside-Down, v. 14

“There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.”

The use of the expression “to whom it happens” is a quiet acknowledgement that, while God's providence rules over all things, from our perspective it often seems like stuff just happens. In fact, in chapter 9, Solomon will say, “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.”

Here, Solomon uses the term “vanity” or “hevel” twice to describe this reality – “that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous.” It's hevel; it's vaporous, a temporary and passing reality that is impossible to grasp, and that at times seems insane or even meaningless, like the rest of life under the sun. Yet hevel, vanity, is not the final word; we can know for sure that perfect, unerring divine justice is coming.

2. Enjoy Your Life

So, what do we do? How do we live? What can we hold onto in the midst of the vanity?

And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

We have nothing better, nothing more solid, nothing more lasting, nothing more certain here in this passing life under the sun than to receive with joy the enjoyable things “that God has given.” Yes, the king is sometimes wrong. Yes, justice is often delayed or even denied. Yes, little girls have brain tumors or suffer severe brain injuries. Yes, wicked mass-murdering dictators like Herod get extravagant funeral processions, while innocent people are put to death for no good reason and their bodies are left for the dogs to eat. But all of this is only temporary; the long life of the wicked is just a shadow; the intense suffering of the righteous is just smoke, only vapor – it may choke us for a time, but it will pass.

Meanwhile, God has given us the blessing of weddings to celebrate, a wonderful bonfire with a tasty taco bar, friendship, laughter, good strong coffee, warm hugs, smiles, play, and restful sleep. It's a good life, in many ways, even though it is hard and sometimes upside down. And we are to enjoy it because God has given it to us!

3. Don't Try to Understand, Explain or Control It

And we must remember that we are not God! Receiving and enjoying are things we're given and able to do, but grasping is NOT –

¹⁶ When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, ¹⁷ 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.

Because we're made in the image of God, we can often see how crooked the world is. The trouble of the world often weighs heavily on us. (“For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him.” – v. 6) We sometimes lose sleep over it. But we cannot figure out or control things. The power to grasp is far beyond our power.

Now, I want to make a distinction here that I think is supported by this chapter as well as by the rest of Scripture: We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves, to care for the widows and orphans in their distress, to feed the hungry, and serve the poor. So, we shouldn't read Ecclesiastes as calling for a fatalistic *Que sera sera* resignation. No, I think verse 5-6 are calling us to be wise and take opportunity to do good and to seek to influence the king and to establish justice, as God provides such opportunities. We must not be blind to the suffering or callous to the concerns of others.

But the danger of utopianism is real, too. Time and time again, people have tried to make the world a perfect place – a classless society, a pure society, a perfect world here on earth – and historically, such efforts have not only failed but have resulted in millions of deaths of innocent people along the way. On a smaller scale, we may try to control our families or our church or our communities to try to force them to be straight and right and perfect, but we can end up doing a lot of harm in the process. I think this can also be part of what is meant in 7:16 “Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself?” We need wisdom, not only to know the right thing to do, but also to know our own limitations, to see how powerless we are to achieve perfection in our own hearts and lives, much less in the hearts and lives of those around us.

To try to accomplish a perfect and final state of justice and righteousness in ourselves, our families, our church, our community, our nation – this is to try to wield the levers of the universe, to try to be God. Not only will we fail, but we will hurt ourselves and others in the process.

What does a life of faith look like?

Instead, we are called to walk in the fear of the Lord – that is, to live a life of repentance and faith. But what does that look like? Last week, we saw the definitions of these terms, faith and repentance, and so we can summarize by saying a life of faith and repentance looks something like this: “A sinner, out of a sinner having truly realized his sin and grasped the mercy of God in Christ, turns from his sin with grief and hatred and turns to God, receiving and rest upon Christ alone for salvation as He is freely offered to us in the gospel, with full resolve and effort after new obedience by grace through faith in Christ.”

So, if that's the definition, what does it look like to live this way, day-by-day? It looks like turning from ourselves and trusting in Christ, a daily dependence upon Christ – beginning our day seeking Him in prayer and in the Scriptures, seeking Him throughout the day – a thankful receiving of all He gives us, and a joyful desire to obey all he commands us, knowing we will fall short, but when we do so, we will fall on His mercy.

I think Paul gives us one of the most concise descriptions of this kind of lifestyle in I Thessalonians 5:9-24 –

God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.

¹² We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle,^[4] encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. ¹⁵ See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil.

²³ Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

Notice how the whole is framed by the work of God – God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ in verse 9 and God's work of sanctification in verses 23-24. And notice how the whole of it rests on the faithfulness of God, who will surely do it. But within the framework of the reality that it is God's work of salvation from beginning to end, and that He will surely do it, we are given a rapid-fire series of commands to obey:

- *Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.*
- *Respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you (your elders), and esteem them very highly in love because of their work.*
- *Be at peace among yourselves.*
- *Admonish the idle,*
- *Encourage the fainthearted,*
- *Help the weak,*
- *Be patient with them all.*
- *See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.*
- *Rejoice always,*
- *pray without ceasing,*
- *give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*
- *Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies,*

- *Test everything; hold fast what is good. ²² Abstain from every form of evil.*

This is not a passive resignation, but an active and loving obedience. Yet it is also not a driven perfectionism. It is a loving, trusting, abiding obedience. May the Lord give us the grace to live lives of faith, to walk in the fear of the Lord!