

XI. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective
From Vanity to Vitality
“The Day of Death and the Day of Judgment”
Ecclesiastes 8
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May 19, 2019 • Evening Sermon

Before I get to Ecclesiastes 8 I want to tell you something that happened today. A man came up to me after service and told me he had a question for me but it wasn't a theological one. So I said 'Then it's not a question.' He said 'What do you mean?' I said 'Every single question in life is a theological question.' That is one of the points that the repenting Solomon is making in the book of Ecclesiastes. When you attempt to live life a-theological that is under the sun, where you say 'eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die,' it's vanity, foolishness, emptiness and nothing. Solomon is confessing where he walked away from wisdom as he fell into the wisdom of the world which led him to vanity, emptiness and nothing. Now he is giving us the fruit of that and how God has brought him, using the language of the prodigal son and the demoniac, to his senses. When the prodigal returns to his father it first says he came to his senses and when the demoniac was converted it says he was now in his right mind.

It's interesting how a lot of people will tell you that faith is a leap in the dark. I would say and I believe Solomon is trying to teach us that faith is not a leap in the dark but walking in the light. If you live a-theologically that in and of itself is a theological statement and when you attempt to be a-theological you are making a leap into the dark. I do a ten minute podcast Monday through Friday called Today In Perspective and this last week we had a news event dealing with the issue of evolution. Evolution is something that came from Darwin who declares himself an atheist but that doesn't mean he doesn't have a god, it just means he becomes a materialist. That is he believes space, time and matter are eternal and if you give enough time to matter and space you get what we are now. For me that is an enormous leap in the dark because you haven't even yet explained where the space, time and matter came from. How did nothing make something? To quote C.S. Lewis, 'I just don't have enough faith to go there.'

It makes more sense to make a theological statement that says 'In the beginning (time) God created the heavens (space) and the earth (matter)' (Genesis 1:1) and then He ordered it over the six days as He brings it into existence. So we have a world and life view issue in the book of Ecclesiastes. That is one of the reasons why in the beginning of our study on Ecclesiastes I suggested you read the commentary on Ecclesiastes by Philip Ryken and the subtitle to his commentary is 'Everything Matters.' If you try to live apart from the wisdom of God then everything becomes meaningless (vanity) but if you live under the eye of God with the wisdom of God now everything matters in life. There is nothing that is not theological. Everything comes from who God is and what God does. That is where Solomon is bringing us and now we get to Ecclesiastes 8.

Ecclesiastes 8 defies a logical outline for me to preach through it. It is a collection of statements that Solomon is working his way through. The tissues of connecting are not that clear but he seems to be moving to things that God has put upon his heart. He starts off by capturing what we have studied previously in Ecclesiastes 7 and that is about wisdom from above. He starts off using rhetorical questions. Because this kind of defies outlining I have to work through this expositionally as a commentary where we just work through the Word of God step by step because of the way Solomon has put it together.

Ecclesiastes 8:1 says *[1] 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.* Seemingly when he asks these two rhetorical questions, what answer do you think he is calling for? Who is that you put confidence as the wise? The second question is who knows the discernment of a thing in life? Again, it seems to be demanding the answer as nobody but the problem with answering nobody to those questions is when he then says 'a man's wisdom makes his face shine.' Basically he is telling us that when someone has wisdom their countenance changes and I believe that by in large. Wisdom begins inside (the thoughts of the heart) and when something is going on inside it lights up through the countenance.

So how can we say that if nobody's countenance has ever been changed? So because of that the answer to the two questions is not nobody but somebody and the somebodies have a changed countenance. The man who has the wisdom to take a look at the issues of life and give you wise insight (wisdom from above), not under the sun, that is theologically informed by the Spirit of God and the Word of God, it shows up on their face as they communicate it to you.

We know that it means somebody because we have somebodies in the Bible who were wise, whose countenance showed it and who people went to for discernment about the complexities and challenges of life in a broken world. Even unbelievers would go to them. Four of them we have already mentioned in this study – Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These men were not only wise but occupied five dynasties and two empires as counselors, men of wisdom who were sought out by pagan kings in the complexities of life. You can have wisdom by the grace of God to the glory of God from above and that's why James 1:5 tells us if any lack wisdom let him ask of God, not double-minded but by believing. He gives graciously in which we see it with Daniel.

I want to show this in Daniel. In Daniel 1 we see that Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego has told them they cannot use food that has been given to the worship of idols and really it's the participation in the worship of idols that they are not going to participate in so it's not that they are actually vegetarians. They were going to have to eat at the king's table and what was put on the king's table came from that which had been used in pagan worship. So they asked just to eat fruits and vegetables. Daniel 1:14–16 says *[14] So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. [15] At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. [16] So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.*

They had made a statement of wisdom of the Lord in their appearance and the Lord blessed them for the evidence of the wisdom they had brought as a solution to the steward who was to have charge over them showed him they were better and fatter. I love this that wise people seem to appear as fatter people (smile). Now look at what Daniel 1:20–21 says; *[20] And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. [21] And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.* That's a long span from King Nebuchadnezzar to King Cyrus. That is through two empires – Babylonian and Medo-Persian – and five kings. Time and time again these five kings would come to Daniel to ask for wisdom and he becomes known as a man with wisdom.

Solomon and James are telling the truth for you can gain wisdom by God's Word by God's Spirit. It will show up in the countenance of your life and it gives you the wisdom to deal with the complexities of life. Some think this is a gray area of life. Sometimes it's hard to really know the answer in certain things but many times those gray areas are situations in which

multiple principles are impinging upon the same event. That's where people not only need to have knowledge but understanding that leads to wisdom for wisdom is behavior with understanding based upon knowledge. That's why the book of Proverbs is put together as knowledge, understanding and wisdom. You know the facts, you have understanding of the facts and in wisdom you know how to apply them in life. God does give wisdom in life.

The rhetorical questions are not there to bring you to a nihilistic view where nobody has wisdom but on the contrary to tell you that God does give wisdom. It shows up in their countenance and their ability to apply Biblical truth to the complexities of life in a broken world because of sin. The principles come not from a view under the sun but a view that is from the Word of God that is given by God Himself and that is understood through the Spirit of God. Then Solomon seems to go in another direction. Let's look back at Ecclesiastes 8.

Ecclesiastes 8:2-6 says [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.*

From the puritans and others there has come this doctrine called the Divine Right of Kings where kings are in existence by the oath of God, God's oath. There are some who would challenge this. Some say this means that you're supposed to obey the king because in the name of God you took an oath to Him. That certainly has a ring of application to it but I don't think that's what it is saying. I think it is referring to God's oath to the king, not our oath in the name of God to the king, where God has ordained to work through kings. The kings don't have to be believers to enable Him to work through them. Proverbs 21:1 says [1] *The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.*

Then he tells us in Ecclesiastes 8:3 not to be leave the king's presence. You can see this in the lives of the royal family. I remember the study of the life of Churchill where he had to be taught and he would teach other prime ministers that when you leave the presence of the king or queen you never turn your back on them for you always walk backwards and you never go out the door until they say you can. That's the idea that's here in terms of manners but they are really trying to tell you not to abandon the king hastily whom the Lord has appointed. That is telling you that your predisposition is to obey those in authority over you. Peter says in I Peter 2:17, [17] *Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor (obey) the emperor.* We in the name of God with a big view of God are set free to obey the king, not because the king is God, but because of God's oath to the king. God works through kings and even through their mistakes.

What if the king is demanding us to disobey God? We are also taught in the Bible if the king gives a decree that causes us to transgress the law of God then we must obey God rather than man. In God's oath He has delegated authority to the king, now all delegated authority by Divine decree is sacred but it is not infallible nor is it without recourse in your life. So there may come a time to abandon the king but never are we to do it hastily. Our presupposition and predisposition is to obey those in authority over us, but there may be a well thought through abandonment of a king who is causing you to disobey God.

This is why he continues in Ecclesiastes 8:3 by saying *Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases.* In other words, don't get caught up in a revolution that is nothing more than vigilantism. An evil cause would mean in context something against the

king with an idea of a revolution. There may be a time in which a revolution is not an evil cause but a righteous cause. No act in a revolution against those in authority should ever be taken unless those in authority are causing us to transgress the Word of God and you should never take a stand against authority unless you are under other authority.

I have an example from our own revolution here. The revolution was not engaged for what was declared was an independence from one government to the formation of another government so that there was a provisional constitution and provisional congress and a provisional leadership of the colonies. It wasn't just simply going on their own and it's the reason I take people to carpenter's hall where they had those debates ending all this. Because they would not abandon the king even though it was unjust tyranny, unless they were under authority. So it's not anarchy but being under right authority, but not having a disposition to walk away from the king or to be in an evil cause of revolution for personal gratification and satisfaction. Why? It is because the word of the king is supreme and there's the law.

So who is king in our country? Our king is the constitution, not the President. Now that doesn't mean we don't show respect to the President but the President stands in authority by virtue of the constitution. The constitution doesn't stand because of the President nor the judiciary nor the legislators nor the senators. Lex Rex is the law of our land which means the law is king. That's why all of our elected officials take vows to the constitution for we are a republic with publically elected officials. If they change the constitution to make us transgress the law of God then we would have to deal with the inadequacy of that king.

It's been an amazing experiment in our country if you don't mind my application. Most of the time when we are talking about a king we are talking about a monarchy. In our country when we're talking about king we're talking about a document – the Constitution of the United States. So in our country that is why we make an appeal to it because it's the final word in our country. The executive office executes it. The judicial office makes judgments through it and the legislature makes any amendments or corrections to it.

Then Solomon sums it up in Ecclesiastes 8:4–5 by saying you can't go wrong with obedience to duly constituted authority for it's there by divine oath. And if you have to rebel against it you will know when the time is right, the way is right and the reason is right. Wisdom will know the proper time and the just way if you are to abandon the king or you are to take up cause against the king. I think Ecclesiastes 8:6 is Solomon's reference to our sin nature. The biggest problem with wisdom from above is our sin nature which keeps perverting it or if you're converted the old man that is within you that keeps clouding for you what divine wisdom is and ought to be at work within our lives.

I think it's talking about even more than what I have already said about the oath. Think about who is writing this. Who is Solomon? He is the son of David. What did God do with David? He made an oath to David. Solomon knows an oath was made to his father and it's why he is still in authority. God said 'I will bring a king from you and there will never lack for a king of the line of David in my kingdom.' (I Kings 9:5, Jeremiah 33:17) Solomon knows that redemptive grace of the divine oath for a king to his father for it's not only the reason Solomon is there but it's the fulfillment of the divine oath for our King Jesus. Jesus is the Son of David, greater than David who rules and reigns forever. Ultimately Solomon is giving us a prophetic Word about Christ. Christ is the One who exists from the Divine oath that God makes who will be our King who rules and reigns forever. Let's continue.

Ecclesiastes 8:7–9 says [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. Now all of sudden he jumps to death.

In verse 7 he is basically saying that no man knows the future unless God reveals it and grants him the wisdom of a prophetic word. Then he goes from the future to a particular thing in the future – the day you die. There is coming a day you will get out of bed and you won't get back in it. There's coming a day you don't get out of bed and you're never going to leave it. Hebrews 9:27 says [27] *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.* This is the reason for the title of this study – the day of death, the day of judgment – and God is the One who appoints those two days. No one knows there day. We may break God's law and take God's law into our own hands and murder ourselves but we don't know the day of the divine appointment of our death.

So what does he mean by no man has the power to retain the spirit? The other day I was in Chattanooga, Tennessee and rode by the places I was a student pastor at and there was this older man in the church who I always thought was a wise man. Every week when I was a student pastor I would go by, sit down to have a cup of coffee with him and talk with him. His name was Danny and his wife was Nancy. He always had these deep things to talk about and his wife seemed to be opposite of him with questions coming out of nowhere. One day we were talking about death because he had just lost his mother and then his wife said 'I'm not going to die.' I said 'Yes you are.' She said 'No, I'm not. Define dying for me pastor.' I said 'It is when the spirit leaves the body and one of the ways you know that is you stop breathing.' She said 'That's what I'm telling you, I'm not going to stop breathing.' I said 'Yes you are.' She said 'No, I'm not for whenever that time comes I'll just take another breath because I am not going to quit breathing.' That is catamount to this text.

I will retain my spirit. No, for when God brings us and the body gives up the spirit God won't be stopped and we won't know the day. Nor do we have the power to thwart that day. Therefore it is in that day that God brings our death but no one knows it. When is it that you see a lot of deaths? It's in a war and now look what Solomon goes to. I sometimes think Solomon might have had a mild case of benevolent ADD. He goes from kings and authorities to death and then to being in the army. Where did 'there is no discharge from war' come from in Ecclesiastes 8:8.

Then he basically says your sinfulness cannot deliver you so even someone who is in rebellion against God in the day of war can't leave. AWOL means you will be put to death. I guess that's how death brings him to this because if you're in a war you're facing death and if you decide out of sinfulness and wickedness to abandon your post then they will shoot you for treason. The Old Testament here is doing what is consistently done in the Bible and that is honoring those who bear the sword in armies to defend others. That is an honorable profession, an honorable calling.

Were any centurions or Romans soldiers converted in the New Testament? Yes and did Jesus, Matthew or Paul who had dealings with centurions tell them they had to leave the army when they were converted? No. John the Baptist tells a Roman soldier to stick to their post and that's exactly what Solomon is saying. When the day of danger comes and you fear death don't leave your post for you are in the honorable place. If you sinfully leave what you have been called to do to defend others then that will become your day of death, but stay there for you're in the honorable place. One might be thinking 'what if it's an unjust war' then we're all the way

back to cause and wisdom but we're dealing with a soldier that is in the just profession of defending others with the sword.

Ecclesiastes 8:9 says [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 verse is foundational to the structure of this country. He is saying that power corrupts. Yes there may come a time you have to bring arms to bear against the king because power has corrupted him and he doesn't see himself in place because of divine oath for he sees himself as divine. The state is always the ever potential rival against the Almighty.

We live in a broken world. We want to be delivered. If you reject Christ almost everyone turns to the state to be the savior. The state that says it can save you from everything will soon take everything. That's why tyrannical governments always attack the church of Christ because the God of the Scriptures they see as their rival. They begin to attack the living God because power has corrupted them.

I agree that power corrupts but I don't agree that absolute power corrupts absolutely, because there is only one case of absolute power and that is El Shaddai – God Almighty and He is incorruptible. Power corrupts and unaccountable increasing power will increasingly corrupt. My words are carefully chosen in that last statement. Once people get power they are now tempted toward corruption and the use of that power to the hurt of others.

The greatest remedy is not to try and take power. When you're in a position that requires leadership, guidance and oversight then you have to give people the oversight, authority and power to do what they have been elected to do. But you need to provide accountability to their power, authority and oversight. So increasing power increasingly corrupts if the increasing power is unaccountable. That's why we have such an unwieldy form of government.

Our forefathers understood this text of Scripture. They understood that unchecked power will corrupt and unaccountable power will increasingly corrupt. So they made sure they had this unwieldy thing of no king except the law. Then they put in the position three offices that are interdependent but not hierarchical. You probably think, 'why is he giving us a civics lesson?'

That's not what this is for I'm about to give you an ecclesiastical lesson because they borrowed their whole system from the Presbyterians for we have that system in place in the church. We don't have a bishop over the church or one man in authority over a church. The Bible said to let the elders rule so we're not Congregationalists where we're independent. No, our congregation is submissive to other congregations in our presbytery and our presbytery to other presbyteries in our denomination. Our pastor is submissive to elders and our pastor has to answer to a presbytery. Our pastors our guided by a pastor on a staff are submissive to the session and other elders of the church but also into the presbytery.

That is ultimately why I became a Presbyterian. It was the one form of government that I saw accomplish the one Biblical commandment to be in submission to each other. It's the only system I've seen that deals with the data of the Scripture and every church, member and leader is accountable to somebody. That's crucial for you, because once someone gets unaccountable then they begin to increase power and increasing power increasingly corrupts.

So Solomon gives us the call that the sin nature and that remnant of sin nature that hangs heavy on that body of death can mar our wisdom unless we're constantly seeking God. And if you're seeking God for wisdom then your countenance will show it and you will have discernment to deal with the issues and complexities of life. There will be wisdom in counselors. More wisdom in many counselors but make sure they're wise counselors who look at life from a Biblical world and life view.

Then learn how to function in the context of being under authority, even the authority of a king. Learn how to deal with the issue of death for you don't know the day, it's in the hands of God. So even if you're serving the Lord at a point of danger in an army don't leave your post for you're in the hands of God. You're as safe on a battlefield as you are in your bedroom, if you're doing the will of God. That's where the courage of Christian soldiers arises.

Realize that if God ever puts you in a position of authority that has the necessary power to do what you have been called to do, your next question is 'who do I answer to?' because you never want to be in any position where you're not answering to somebody and hopefully a plurality of somebodies, because there is wisdom in many. This is what Solomon is teaching us thus far in this text.

Solomon is not through talking about death. I will tell you more about this in the next study as we look at the rest of Ecclesiastes 8. Take some time on your own to work through this book and please make use of the commentary I mentioned at the beginning of this study. Remember that every question is theological because everything in life is theological. Philip Ryken in his commentary on Ecclesiastes got this right. Everything matters. Everything in the life of a believer matters, even what you eat and drink. Let's pray.

Prayer:

God, thank You so much for our time together in Your Word. Thank You for Jesus who is our wisdom. We confess to you that we're like children Jesus for we don't know how to go out and come in but we also confess that You have said to ask for wisdom and You Jesus, give us wisdom through Your Word and by Your Spirit. Grant it to us and may our very countenance and counsel to others reflect the presence of Your wisdom in our life and not the chaos of that wisdom that is earthly and demonic. Then God, help us to apply that in life. Help us to obey the king because we fear the Lord. God, I thank You that wisdom always begins with a big God and that's why we can obey even small kings. God our trust is in You. We lean not on our own understanding. Guide us with wisdom from above and we will acknowledge You in all of our ways as we trust You, in Jesus' Name, Amen.