

## “Living Under the Thumb”<sup>1</sup> (Ecclesiastes 8:1-17)

One day, a bus driver was driving along his usual route. He didn't encounter any problems for the first few stops; a few people got on, a few got off, and things went generally well. At one stop, however, a big hulk of a man got on. He was 6' 8", built like a bodybuilder, and his arms hung down to the ground. He glared at the driver and told him, "Big John doesn't pay!" Then he sat down at the back of the bus. The driver was 5' 3", thin, and very meek, so he didn't argue with Big John. But he wasn't happy about it. The next day, the same thing happened. Big John got on again, made a big show of refusing to pay, and sat down. It happened the next day, and again the day after that. The bus driver began to lose sleep over the way Big John was taking advantage of him. Finally, he could stand it no longer. He signed up for bodybuilding courses, karate, judo, and a class on finding your self-esteem. By the end of the summer, the bus driver had become quite strong and felt really good about himself. The next Monday, Big John entered the bus and again declared, "Big John doesn't pay!" Enraged, the driver stood up, glared back at Big John, and bellowed, "And why not?!" With a surprised look on his face, Big John replied, "Big John has a bus pass."<sup>2</sup>

This poor bus driver learned a valuable lesson: Things are not always as they appear. In Eccl 8:1-17, Solomon shares that in the midst of life we must trust that God is in control of those things we don't understand. This requires humility and wisdom. I am reminded of an old country song by Mac Davis, "It's Hard to Be Humble." I would suggest, "*It's easier to be humble when you submit to authority.*" In this chapter, Solomon gives two simple tips for living with humility (and wisdom).

**1. Respect human authority (8:1-9).** In this section, Solomon urges us to respect human authorities. Ironically, Solomon writes these words as the King of Israel. He is a king writing about how to get along with the king. In 8:1a Solomon poses an insightful question: "**Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter?**" This rhetorical question requires the answer, "No one!" No one is like the wise person who studies the Bible and knows God's will. Solomon continues in 8:1b by stating: "**A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam.**" Solomon says the wise person is illumined and has so much joy that you can see it on his face. He is not telling us to be wise and fake it; he is saying that we should be joyful, no matter what the circumstances are.<sup>3</sup> What do others see when they look at you? Do you have joy? If not, perhaps it's because you aren't soaking in the wisdom of God's Word. It's not being integrated into your life and giving you joy. Wisdom brings joy because a person who has biblical wisdom is assured of what is right. There is no greater privilege than understanding where we came from, who we are, where we are going, how sin is removed, and what the will of God is. There is no greater blessing and there is no other place to find these answers than from God in His Word. Solomon begins this chapter by saying that in a world full of questions, it's wonderful to know the absolutes of life. Some things in life we can't understand but some things we can understand—what the moral will of God is, who He is, and who we are in Him.<sup>4</sup>

In 8:2-4, Solomon explains our responsibility to government. Now this may remove the smile from your face; however, God wants us to exercise wisdom and behave appropriately in the presence of our king. In 8:2 Solomon writes, "**I say, 'Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God.'**" Solomon begins this section with a command: "Keep the command of the king."<sup>5</sup> Notice that this obedience is not for the sake of the king. It is for the sake of the One who placed the king on the throne.<sup>6</sup> It is "because of the oath before God." It was the practice in the ancient world that when a king came to the throne, the people of his kingdom were required to swear an oath of obedience to that king.<sup>7</sup> Today we do not enter into these kinds of oaths. But we do make commitments to authorities. We pledge allegiance to the country of our citizenship. When we work for an employer, we are bound to obey him until such a time that we leave his employment. At our church, members promise to worship, serve, give, and submit to the leadership. We all make commitments ("oaths") to various authorities.

Unfortunately, we have a tendency to make commitments or oaths prematurely and then find ourselves unable to fulfill them. God sees this as breaking our oath to Him, not to the king. How you obligate yourself to work, marriage, and church, is a great indication of your character. If you were hasty to get married and now find that you aren't as motivated to keep your vows as you were in the beginning, realize that God is who you are breaking your oath to. If you make promises to your work in order to get the job, and now you find that you can't manage to fulfill these promises, remember that God is the One you are offending. If you promise that you will serve at the church and use your gifts for God's glory, then falter in your promises, remember it is God whom you are breaking your commitment to. Does this mean you should never make vows or promises? No. It means you should be cautious who you obligate yourself to and ensure that when you make obligations, even small ones, God is behind all of it. We ought to remember that any authority under which we find ourselves is a God-ordained authority and should be obeyed. The only exception to this rule is when such an authority commands us to do something that is in opposition to God's Word. Only then are we to disobey, and then only in that single area.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, it is not always easy to obey a king. There are times when kings don't do what we want or expect them to do. This leads Solomon to write in 8:3-4: **“Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases.”**<sup>9</sup> **“Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, ‘What are you doing?’”**<sup>10</sup> The idea here is of abandoning support for a leader just because he does not do what you wanted or expected him to do. Earlier in Eccl 4:13-16, Solomon discussed how a king's popularity can quickly evaporate. Someone new comes along and the people throw to his side abandoning the present leader. Solomon says that wisdom should slow this down and will use caution in leaving a leader. This is also relevant in other areas of our lives. It is easy to become disenchanted with your spouse and assume that if you leave your current spouse you can be happier with a new spouse. It is easy to become disillusioned at church by pastors or those in leadership. Most people immediately threaten to leave, assuming that they will not have these types of frustrations at other churches. This principle also applies to our jobs. The greener grass syndrome is very deceptive. In our attempt to escape our troubles, we may find further grief and pain.

The NIV's translation of the second clause of 8:3 (“Do not stand up for a bad cause”) captures Solomon's intent better than does the NASB's rendering (“Do not join in an evil matter”). The NASB's interpretation potentially leaves the reader wondering what exactly the “evil matter” is, or perhaps even if the author is urging the reader not to participate together with the king in some jointly executed evil act. By contrast, the NIV's interpretation of the second clause helps the reader to understand that the prohibited action is one in which an individual joins together with others in an attempt to thwart or contradict some action of the king (or perhaps even to participate in a plot to overthrow the king).<sup>11</sup> Solomon warns against acting in opposition to a king because a king does whatever he wants. Furthermore, a king has the right to rule and you do not. *It's easier to be humble when you submit to authority.*

In 8:5-7, Solomon brings up the theme of timing when he writes, **“He who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight,<sup>12</sup> though a man's trouble<sup>13</sup> is heavy upon him. If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen?”** The wise person knows the right time to act (8:5), because there is a right time for every action (8:6). Yet, no one can fully predict when that right time will be, because no one (other than God) knows the future (8:7). Not only are you to obey human authority because God said to do it, you are also to do so because it makes life a lot easier. Generally speaking, when you obey the king's commands, you don't get into any trouble with the king.<sup>14</sup> This principle has many modern-day corollaries. When you drive the speed limit, you don't have to worry about speed traps. When you pay your taxes, you aren't particularly worried about an IRS audit. When you do your work faithfully on the job, it doesn't concern you that the boss is watching. So save yourself some grief and obey the laws of the land. Not only will you be pleasing the Lord, but you will avoid trouble. *It's easier to be humble when you submit to authority.*

This first section closes in 8:8-9. Solomon writes, **“No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge in the time of war, and evil will not deliver those who practice it. All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over another man to his hurt.”** This is a general summation of the human situation. Solomon reminds us that we have no control over some of the most important elements in our lives. We have no control over the weather that affects us daily. You’ve probably taken a trip to the coast hoping for sunshine, but instead you are greeted with rain and wind. We have no control of the weather. We have little or no control over what may be considered the most significant day of our earthly lives—the day of our death. We can eat healthy, take vitamins, exercise, and still die unexpectedly. A doctor told his patient, “I’m afraid you only have three weeks to live,” “Okay then,” the patient replied, “I’ll take the last two weeks of July and the week between Christmas and New Year’s.”<sup>15</sup> That’s not how it works. We have no control over our death day. We also have little or no control over events that might hasten the day of our death (i.e., being discharged from war). Sadly, Solomon informs us that when we do have authority (8:9), we tend to use it to hurt others. In all of this uncertainty and frustration we must trust the Lord as we go through life. *It’s easier to be humble when you submit to authority.*

[God is clear that we are to respect human authority. In our second section, He will say...]

**2. Respect divine authority (8:10-17).** In this section, Solomon urges us to fear God and submit to Him. In 8:10 he writes, **“So then, I have seen the wicked buried, those who used to go in and out from the holy place, and they are soon forgotten in the city where they did thus. This too is futility.”** In this verse, “the wicked” are unbelievers who go through the motions of attending “the holy place” (i.e., the Temple) on a regular basis. The phrase translated “they are soon forgotten” or “they received praise” is better rendered “they boasted” (NET).<sup>16</sup> These hypocrites assume that they can disrespect God and His authority over their lives. But God wants the wicked to know that He has the last laugh.

In 8:11, Solomon explains that one of the primary reasons the wicked continue in their wickedness is delayed justice. He puts it like this: **“Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil.”** God’s mercy in not executing judgment immediately against those who sin is interpreted by those who do not openly fear God as being either a sign of weakness or impotence on God’s part, or a sign of a laissez-faire attitude on God’s part. The sinner then assumes (incorrectly, of course) that God does not really care whether people sin or not and/or that there are no negative consequences for sinning. Thus, the sinner feels secure in a self-oriented life, doing whatever he or she desires to do with no worries about what God may think or do. This is also true in government and paternal discipline. We slough off if there are no consequences.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of the fact that the wicked seem to prosper, Solomon argues that it is still better to fear God. In 8:12-14 he writes, **“Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly. But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God. There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility.”** Solomon acknowledges that sometimes justice is backwards. The righteous receive what the wicked deserve and vice versa. A criminal gets shot and sues the city. A Christian family is killed by a drunk driver. Missionaries are martyred. Babies are aborted. These are depressing mysteries in life that cannot be resolved “under the sun.” Yet, these mysteries may have been generated intentionally by God so that humans would have to trust Him to guide them.<sup>18</sup> In the end, the wicked will come and go. Their end will come quickly for their lives are likened to a shadow that passes by. Solomon emphasizes the “fear” of God three times in 8:12-13. The inevitable conclusion is that this is the only way to live one’s life.

In Psalm 73, Asaph contrasts the end of the wicked with that of the righteous. He reminds us that although it appears that the wicked are defying God, ultimately, the Lord will judge them in righteousness and truth. Asaph did not come to this realization by looking at the circumstances around him, he had to enter into the sanctuary of God; then he perceived their end! (Ps 73:17) The truth is, apart from the Scripture and fellowship with other believers, we will not find any peace in this life. We need God and each other.

So what is Solomon's solution to this wretched life? He shares his pearls of wisdom in 8:15: **“So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life<sup>19</sup> which God has given him under the sun.”** Solomon says, “Life is to be enjoyed.”<sup>20</sup> The formal refrain: “to eat and to drink and to be merry” is Solomon's way of saying: “Life is a gift from God, make the most of it.” *Carpe Diem*: “Seize the Day!” Even though life doesn't always make sense, even though we don't always understand what God is doing, we can trust in His sovereignty and let Him worry about all that is going on around us. So go out and enjoy your favorite meal! Do you like Chinese, Mexican, Italian, or a good steak or burger? Whatever your preference, eat and enjoy yourself. Solomon also tells us to drink. He means just what he says, “Drink,” but be sure to do so in moderation. Finally, he encourages us to be merry. Since you can't change the present, the past, or the future, you might as well trust God and be content...even downright merry. Life is short and then you die. Why make this life miserable? Enjoy it.

Chapter 8 closes in 8:16-17 with these words: **“When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), and I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, ‘I know,’ he cannot discover.”<sup>21</sup>** Solomon discovered that he could not discover. God's great knowledge and immensity overwhelmed him. Solomon is not alone. The more we work and think through various quandaries, the more we ought to recognize that we are humble peons that can't discover a thing. What we really need is to stop striving and straining and to return to simple faith in God.

An advanced student asked the legendary Bruce Lee if Lee would teach him everything he knew about martial arts. In response, Lee held up two cups, both filled with water: “This cup represents all I know, and the second cup represents all you know,” Lee said. “If you want to fill your cup with my knowledge, you must first empty your cup of your knowledge.”<sup>22</sup>

Harry Houdini made a name for himself by escaping from every imaginable confinement—from straightjackets to multiple pairs of handcuffs clamped to his arms. He boasted that no jail cell could hold him. Time and again, he would be locked in a cell only to reappear minutes later. It worked every time—but one. He accepted another invitation to demonstrate his skill. He entered the cell, wearing his street clothes, and the jail cell door shut. Once alone, he pulled a thin but strong piece of metal from his belt and began working the lock. But something was wrong. No matter how hard Houdini worked, he couldn't unlock the lock. For two hours he applied skill and experience to the lock but failed time and time again. Two hours later he gave up in frustration. The problem? The cell had never been locked. Houdini worked himself to near exhaustion trying to achieve what could be accomplished by simply pushing the door open. The only place the door was locked was in his mind.

Faith is not a complex process. It is not the result of years of education, pilgrimages, or flashy supernatural experiences. The door to belief is ready to open and is locked only in the minds of those who choose to believe it is.<sup>23</sup> God wants you and me to stop trying to figure this life out. He just wants us to humble ourselves and submit to Him. Will you trust God in the midst of this unstable and uncertain life? Will you choose to believe that He is bigger and wiser than you are?

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### **Scripture References**

Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

Proverbs 24:21-22

Proverbs 14:35; 16:14; 20:2

Romans 13:1-2

James 5:1-7

Job 38

Romans 9:19-21

### **Study Questions**

1. Whose face comes to mind when I think of being radiant with the joy of the Lord (8:1)? What do others see when they look at me? Do I have the joy of the Lord? Why or why not? Have I used my upbringing or personality to make excuses for my lack of joy?
2. Do I submit to my governing authorities? In what specific ways is this evident in my personal life? Read Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; and 1 Peter 2:13-15. When is disobedience to government appropriate (8:5-6)? Read Daniel 3 and Acts 4:1-29; and 5:29. How have I sought to balance these responses?
3. What does it mean to “fear God” (8:12-13)? How can I know whether or not I fear God? Is it possible to fear God and still eat, drink, and be merry (8:15)? How is it possible to balance these two perspectives?
4. What mysteries have I encountered that defy human understanding (8:16-17)? Have I experienced or observed the mystery of unjust triumph? Have I been confronted with the mystery of unfair consequences? Have I dealt with the mystery of untimely pleasure? What are some valuable lessons I have learned through all of these circumstances? In all of these issues, how have I guarded myself against wrong responses?
5. What would enable me to trust God in spite of my circumstances? What keeps me from trusting Him? How do I think I can grow in my faith and trust? Do I believe that God is in control of everything that happens to me? Would this include both good and bad experiences of life? Can anything happen to me that is not somehow part of God’s plan for me?

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon title is from Charlie Bing's unpublished sermon by the same title.

<sup>2</sup> Preaching Today citation: Submitted by Ed Rowell, Monument, CO.

<sup>3</sup> Repeatedly, the writers of Scripture use the image of a shining face to speak a blessing. In the book of Numbers we read, "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you" (Num 6:24-25). The psalms repeatedly referred to the Lord's face "shinning" upon His people (Pss 31:16; 67:1; 80:3, 7, 19; 119:135). Robert S. Ricker with Ron Pitkin, *Soul Search: Hope for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Living from Ecclesiastes* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1985), 108.

<sup>4</sup> Tommy Nelson, *The Problem of Life with God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 128.

<sup>5</sup> Some understand the reference to "king" (*melek*) to refer to the heavenly King (i.e., God). Yet, Eccl 8:2b ("because of the oath before God") favors the "earthly king" position.

<sup>6</sup> Paul states that kings and other governing officials have been placed in authority by God and are ministers of God (Rom 13:1-7).

<sup>7</sup> See 2 Kgs 11:17; 2 Chron 36:13.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 4:1-29 and 5:29.

<sup>9</sup> This same idea is applied to God in Job 9:12 and Isa 45:9.

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 2 exemplifies a passage that we can find a great deal of comfort and encouragement in. Throughout this Psalm, the writer exalts the awesome God that we serve. Psalm 2:4-5, 12 says, "He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them [nations, kings, and rulers who oppose God]. Then He will speak to them in His anger and terrify them in His fury. Do homage to the Son, lest He become angry, and you perish in the way, for His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!" This chapter can be summarized quite nicely: Woe to those in authority who ignore God's Son!

<sup>11</sup> Barry C. Davis, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, Multnomah Biblical Seminary unpublished class notes.

<sup>12</sup> Davis writes, "Qohelet, in 8:6, seems to be playing off what he said earlier, in 8:3. In 8:3, he declared that the king could and would do whatever "he pleases" (*chaphets*); here, in 8:6, Qohelet argues that there is a right time and a right way to do every "delight" (*chephets*) that we feel compelled to do. The Hebrew words recorded in the previous sentence are derived from the same root form as each other – the former word being a verb form, the latter a noun form. By using these words in this way, Qohelet is emphasizing the fact that, whereas the king may be able to do essentially anything he wants to do whenever he wants to do it, we (by contrast) need to make very certain that, when we take some action that may be contrary to the king's delight / pleasure / command, we move forward with our action at the right time and in the right way." Davis, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*.

<sup>13</sup> "Trouble" (*raah*) here literally means "evil" (see note at 8:3). The LXX has "knowledge" instead of "trouble." Life is hard and unpredictable even for the wise, god-fearing person.

<sup>14</sup> Paul says essentially the same thing in his epistle to the Romans: "For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil" (Rom 13:3-4).

<sup>15</sup> Preaching Today citation: Submitted by Van Morris, Mt. Washington, KY.

<sup>16</sup> Different Hebrew manuscripts show one of two possible readings in Eccl 8:10: (1) "soon forgotten" (NASB; the Masoretic text [Hebrew OT] or (2) "receive praise or boast" (NIV; the Septuagint [Greek OT]). The NET notes settle the matter. "The context of 8:10-17, which focuses on the enigmatic contradictions in divine retribution (sometimes the wicked are not punished), favors the alternate tradition. The wicked boast that they can come and go as they please in the temple, flaunting their irreligion without fearing divine retribution (8:10). This thought is continued in v. 11: failure to execute a sentence against a criminal emboldens the wicked to commit more crimes, confident they will not suffer retribution." Note: the translation "boast" is to be preferred over "praise" because the verb means "boast" in the Hebrew piel verb form.

<sup>17</sup> Michael P. Andrus, "Sharp Goads and Hard Nails" (Eccl 7-11): unpublished sermon.

<sup>18</sup> See also Eccl 3:11; 7:14, 23, 24; 8:17; 11:5.

<sup>19</sup> The phrase "the days of life" is found in Eccl 2:26; 5:18; 6:2; 9:9; 12:7, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Eccl 2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:18; 8:15; 9:7.

<sup>21</sup> Eccl 8:16-17 is either (1) a summary statement which parallels chapters 1-2 or (2) the introduction to a new section (8:16-9:10). Yet, the recurrence of the divider phrase "cannot discover" (Eccl 8:17; cf. 7:14, 28) argues for the inclusion of 8:16-17 with 8:10-15. This is also supported by the bracketing effects of 8:1 ("the wise man...knows") and 8:17 ("man cannot discover"). Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Scripture Press/Victor, 1985), 997.

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<sup>22</sup> David Jeremiah, "Today's Turning Point," 10/31/06.

<sup>23</sup> Preaching Now (5-22-07) Vol. 6 No. 20. This account is taken from Alton Gansky *40 Days*.