

IN YOUR FACE

ECCLESIASTES 8



A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

In Your Face: Ecclesiastes 8
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Ecclesiastes 8: Introduction

Solomon bears down on his son – and “under the sun” readers in every generation – by reminding them that none of their frivolous, self-centered ways will help them figure our life or deliver them from death. They need an entirely new perspective for that.

And that perspective is only found in the wisdom of God.

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We hope you find this study of Ecclesiastes a challenging and stretching experience of journeying more deeply into the Word of God. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Who Is like the Wise?

Pray Psalm 116.5-7.

Gracious *is* the LORD, and righteous;
Yes, our God *is* merciful.
The LORD preserves the simple;
I was brought low, and He saved me.
Return to your rest, O my soul,
For the Lord has dealt bountifully with you.

Read Ecclesiastes 8.1.

Prepare.

1. How does wisdom affect one's appearance?
2. What does wisdom help us do?

Meditate.

Ecclesiastes 8 is Solomon's "in your face" chapter, beginning with verse 1. This verse sounds almost like a cry of frustration: "Are you listening, son? When are you going to wise up?"

Solomon's cry neatly summarizes his argument to this point: Wisdom is the thing; get wisdom. Only the wise man – the man who lives "under heaven" – can sort out the confusion, dilemmas, and challenges of life. Money won't help you when problems are staring you in the face. Fun times will be of no avail when the enemy is at the gates. The wise man's face shines with confidence, hope, and peace, while the fool's face shows etched on it the ravages of anxiety, uncertainty, and a misspent youth. The plea to Rehoboam is to take the long view, think about more than himself, strive to be wise rather than a fool.

This little poetic intrusion follows a powerful pattern of Hebrew parallelism: Say something; say it again and extend it; say it one more time and punctuate it with a bit of irony. Just when it looks like the passage is mounting to soar, it crashes into the stiff, stern face of the fool.

This is "Aha!" writing at its best. It's not hard to imagine Rehoboam becoming a little irritated with his father's urgency, but that doesn't matter. Solomon wanted to make his point boldly and clearly. He needed to get in his son's face at least once during these exchanges.

In our day many believers are reluctant to confront the lost or to urge them with passion to forsake their folly and come to Christ, the very Wisdom of God. But people who are trapped in the lie of unbelief sometimes need a little more than an invitation.

Reflect.

1. Do people today want to be wise? Is wisdom considered a good thing? Explain.
2. How do you think people who do not know the Lord define wisdom? How do they interpret the world and their place in it?

3. Solomon says wisdom has effects even on our countenance. Why is this true?

Here he means that the wisdom of a person makes the face shine, but not the face of the body, not a part of the flesh, but the face of the inner person.... The face of the inner person is illuminated by wisdom. But wisdom, light, Logos, truth and the other conceptions are identical when applied to Christ. Didymus the Blind (313-398), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 233.16

Let Your wisdom, and the hope that is within me, shine forth from me today, Lord, so that I may...

Pray Psalm 116.1-6.

Why do you love the Lord? Recount the reasons before Him in prayer, and ask Him to let His blessings and glory shine through you today.

Sing Psalm 116.1-6.

Psalm 116.1-6 (*Mit Freuden Zart: All Praise to God Who Reigns Above*)

I love the Lord because He hears my cries and pleas for mercy.
Because He bends to me His ears, my prayers shall ever thus be.
The snares of death encompassed me; hell's grip could not unloosened be;
Distress and anguish pressed me.

I called to God, "O Lord, I pray, my soul redeem with favor!"
The Lord is gracious in His way, and righteous is our Savior.
His mercy to the simple flies; He lifted me up to the skies –
I rest in Him forever!

2 The King Is Supreme. Almost.

Pray Psalm 116.16, 17.

O LORD, truly I *am* Your servant;
I *am* Your servant, the son of Your maidservant;
You have loosed my bonds.
I will offer to You the sacrifice of thanksgiving,
And will call upon the name of the LORD.

Read Ecclesiastes 8.2-4.

Prepare.

1. What was the “oath to God”? What did that oath suggest about the king?
2. Why is it important to respect kings and other civil rulers?

Meditate.

Solomon returns to a more “objective” perspective. He was, after all, the king. All his subjects owed allegiance to him, “because of God’s oath” (as the Hebrew actually reads – whether God’s oath to the king about his rule, or the people’s oath to God of obedience, is not clear). That is, their loyalty to God demanded obedience to the king *in the Lord*. If the king’s “commandment” went beyond the requirements of God’s oath, then obedience was not required. Indeed, disobedience may have been in order.

Because he was also Rehoboam’s father, Solomon might have been thinking that his son was beginning to lose sight of who was talking with him. Solomon amassed an impressive record as king of Israel (1 Kgs. 10); he was no one to be trifled with. The king who honors God is to be revered, honored, and obeyed; they who contrive to go against his will can expect to know trouble.

Did Rehoboam see his recalcitrance and flippancy as a form of rebellion? If not, he should have. Is there a hint in this verse that Solomon might anoint someone other than Rehoboam to succeed him (“he does whatever pleases him”, v. 3)? Is it a veiled threat? It sounds at least like a suggestion. The message is clear: If you’re planning to flout the king’s will and take advantage of his largesse, things might not work out like you hope.

Of course, in the larger, “under heaven”, perspective, Solomon’s words are even more true – and menacing. Rebellious men need to know that their persistence in sinful ways is an affront to almighty God, the eternal King. Men might think they can ignore His will, reject His bidding, and pursue their own sinful ways with impunity. But the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress His truth under lives of wickedness (Rom. 1.18ff.).

Sometimes our witness needs to include the warning that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10.31).

Reflect.

1. Paul says that government is God’s servant for good (Rom. 13.1-4). In what sense is this true?

2. Solomon actually commands us to *guard* the king's commandment. How should believers do that today?

3. How can believers today work to help our various governments fulfill their God-appointed calling?

Subjects are obligated by an oath of allegiance to render their obedience to "the powers that be" (Rom. 13:1–5), not ... stand for an evil thing; Even before a king, evil is to be resisted (Acts 5:29). Earl Radmacher (1931-2014), NKJV Study Notes

Today, Lord, I pray for those who are in government, that they might...

Pray Psalm 116.15-19.

Remember those great saints – like Solomon – whose lives and teaching have been of particular benefit to you. Renew your vows to be loyal to God in all things, and give Him thanks for His many blessings.

Sing Psalm 116.15-19.

Psalm 116.15-19 (*Mit Freuden Zart: All Praise to God Who Reigns Above*)

How sweet to Him when saints depart – save me, Your servant, Savior!
From sin You loosed my wand'ring heart; I praise Your Name forever!
On You I call, my vows to pay; here in Your presence I would stay
Your praise to offer ever.

3 Who Knows the Future

Pray Psalm 116.3, 4.

The pains of death surrounded me,
And the pangs of Sheol laid hold of me;
I found trouble and sorrow.
Then I called upon the name of the LORD:
“O LORD, I implore You, deliver my soul!

Read Ecclesiastes 8.5-7.

Prepare.

1. How does Solomon use harm, misery, and uncertainty in these verses? What is he trying to accomplish?
2. How would you answer the question in the second part of verse 7?

Meditate.

Like many young people, Rehoboam perhaps believed that everything he was hoping and dreaming and anticipating, as he waited to inherit his father's throne and wealth, would work out just as he imagined. But he couldn't know the future any more than any other man, and he needed to face that fact.

All kinds of things can go wrong and derail our cherished plans. But the one who keeps the command of the king – and, by intimation, of the heavenly King (v. 5) – can expect that all will be well with him, even though trial and adversity may be his lot in this life (Rom. 8.28). The reminder of Solomon's argument from chapter 3 – a time and place for everything (v. 6) – is meant to renew the point of that passage: God is in charge; God works out the details, not men. A man's lot is to trust in God and walk in His commands. What He commands must be our guiding light in life, for only then can we be certain that we will not succumb to evil.

The message running through these verses – implied by the reference to chapter 3 – is as palpable as heavy dew. Solomon is assaulting Rehoboam's flippancy, arrogance, and finitude, albeit indirectly, in an effort to knock a little sense into his head. He thinks he's got it all figured out, but Solomon wants to remind him that only One can say that. Solomon is bringing his son down, reminding him of his humanness, and, hence, of his susceptibility to all the uncertainties men might face, hoping to point him beyond his folly to God.

Reflect.

1. Compare the first part of verse 5 with Romans 8.28. What do these verses together teach? How should that encourage us in our daily lives?
2. Sometimes judgment increases misery (v. 6). How does Hebrews 12.3-11 support that idea? Is misery always a bad thing, given what we learned in question 1? Explain.
3. Christians can't know the future any more than anyone else. How do we live with that uncertainty?

God has, in wisdom, kept away from us the knowledge of future events, that we may be always ready for changes. We must all die, no flight or hiding-place can save us, nor are there any weapons of effectual resistance. Ninety thousand die every day, upwards of sixty every minute, and one every moment. How solemn the thought! Oh that men were wise, that they understood these things, that they would consider their latter end! Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 8.6-8

You know the future, Lord, and all things besides. Help me to obey Your Word, so that I...

Pray Psalm 116.1-6.

We have no reason to fear death, as long as we keep our eyes on the Lord. Thank Him for the gift of eternal life, and claim His rest and peace for your soul.

Sing Psalm 116.1-6.

Psalm 116.1-6 (*Mit Freuden Zart: All Praise to God Who Reigns Above*)

I love the Lord because He hears my cries and pleas for mercy.
Because He bends to me His ears, my prayers shall ever thus be.
The snares of death encompassed me; hell's grip could not unloosened be;
Distress and anguish pressed me.

I called to God, "O Lord, I pray, my soul redeem with favor!"
The Lord is gracious in His way, and righteous is our Savior.
His mercy to the simple flies; He lifted me up to the skies –
I rest in Him forever!

4 Ultimate Threat

Pray Psalm 116.12-14.

What shall I render to the LORD
For all His benefits toward me?
I will take up the cup of salvation,
And call upon the name of the LORD.
I will pay my vows to the LORD
Now in the presence of all His people.

Read Ecclesiastes 8.8, 9.

Prepare.

1. To what “spirit” is Solomon referring in these verses?
2. Why is a life of wickedness futile and vain?

Meditate.

Death: It looms in the minds of mortal men and haunts their every waking moment (Heb. 2.15). No man can know or determine when his spirit will leave him, and he will ultimately die. Just as uncertain are the events that can hasten death – war and various evils. If you trust in evil to bring you happiness in this life, you will be dismayed to learn that evil will not save you from itself.

Solomon says that he understood this even as he was wandering around in the shadows and swamps of his “under the sun” existence (“All this I have seen...”, v. 9). Rehoboam knew it, too; it simply wasn’t convenient for him to keep it in mind. Like a good dad, however, Solomon was impelled to remind his son of the ultimate issues of life, and to warn him yet again that his foolish lifestyle would not avail him in the face of man’s ultimate threat.

Our generation prefers to avoid the thought of death. We euphemize it – “passing away” or “crossing over”. We do our best to postpone it by staying in shape, eating right, and masking or cutting away the indicators of advancing age. Preaching today avoids much talk of death and what comes after. We understand that the modern world scorns those who preach “hellfire and brimstone”. We prefer to focus on the bright, happy, hopeful side of the Good News.

But, as Solomon knew, the Good News is only truly good against the bad news – that it is appointed for men once to die, and then the judgment (Heb. 9.27).

But then comes the Good News again – at least for those who forsake their “under the sun” lifestyle and look to God and His salvation: Christ has borne our judgment, so that we need not fear dying and may live every day unto Him.

Reflect.

1. Why do people fear dying? Christians may have some qualms about the manner of their dying, but do we need to fear death? Why not?
2. Should our presentation of the Gospel include warnings about death and judgment? Explain.
3. Look at verse 9. Every believer is a “ruler” in their own Personal Mission Field. How can we avoid

doing harm to others by the way we rule our lives?

There is no one who has the power to cause the soul to remain within him or who has the power to take it from other living beings. This depends on providence. Didymus the Blind (313-398), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 240.20

Help me to live obediently, fully, and confidently today, Lord, as I...

Pray Psalm 116.15-19.

Praise and thank God for departed saints who have influenced your life in Christ. Resolve to be such a positive influence in the lives of those to whom God is sending you today.

Sing Psalm 116.15-19.

Psalm 116.15-19 (*Mit Freuden Zart: All Praise to God Who Reigns Above*)

How sweet to Him when saints depart – save me, Your servant, Savior!
From sin You loosed my wand'ring heart; I praise Your Name forever!
On You I call, my vows to pay; here in Your presence I would stay
Your praise to offer ever.

5 The Death of the Wicked

Pray Psalm 116.3, 4.

The pains of death surrounded me,
And the pangs of Sheol laid hold of me;
I found trouble and sorrow.
Then I called upon the name of the LORD:
“O LORD, I implore You, deliver my soul!”

Read Ecclesiastes 8.10-13.

Prepare.

1. Two causes of proliferating evil are mentioned here. What are they?
2. With whom will “it be well” in the end?

Meditate.

Wicked people die, but – Solomon seems to muse – not soon enough. Everyone knows they’re wicked; they do their evil right out in public, even managing a veneer of piety while they prosecute their wicked deeds (v. 10). This is vanity, to be sure.

Wicked lives continue, without being checked by speedy justice. This only encourages others to follow in wicked ways. Thus, wickedness proliferates among men (v. 11). Yet even though wicked people proliferate wicked works out of evil hearts, and seem to get away with their wickedness (v. 11), it is better to fear God always.

Judgment against the wicked will come soon enough; but those who fear the Lord need not fear death. God will make sure that all “will be well” with them (v. 12). “Think about the day of your death, my son,” Solomon seems to say. “You may be getting away with a lot of foolishness now in your rebellion against God, but it won’t last.” Augustine wrote that there is no such thing as a bad death for those who have lived a good life. The opposite is doubtless true: there is no good death for those who persist in living wicked lives. The truly good life is life “under heaven” in the fear of God.

Solomon is keeping the pressure on his son. Fearing God, or not, is a life and death matter. One of the reasons so many unbelievers in our day are not troubled by the thought of going to hell is that the Church has failed to impress on them the eternal consequences of resisting the grace of God. “People don’t want to hear about hell,” the contemporary preacher complains. Well, of course not! But that doesn’t mean we should reduce our preaching to telling stories, focusing on things that feel good, and promising God’s love without responsibility.

Perhaps if more believers actually feared the Lord, this might make their witness to the lost world more urgent and complete.

Reflect.

1. Is the threat of judgment and hell part of the Good News of the Gospel? Explain.
2. Do you think the system of justice in our country encourages or discourages wickedness? Explain.
3. What does Solomon mean by “fearing” God? As we shall see, this is the most important lesson he

learned from his time of prodigality. Do we need to relearn this lesson in our day?

*Let them rest assured that punishment shall be inflicted on the wicked, and rewards shall be bestowed upon the righteous, by him who deals with everyone as each deserves, and who will proportion his rewards to the good that each has done, and to the account of himself that he is able to give. Origen (185-254), *Against Celsus* 8.52*

Lord, do not let me be a source of the continuing evil of our days, but help me instead to...

Pray Psalm 116.4-9.

Thank God, both that He preserves you now and will continue to preserve you forever. Rest in Him, repent of any wickedness, and give all your afflictions to Him, for He cares for you.

Sing Psalm 116.4-9.

Psalm 116.4-9 (*Mit Freuden Zart: All Praise to God Who Reigns Above*)

I called to God, "O Lord, I pray, my soul redeem with favor!"

The Lord is gracious in His way, and righteous is our Savior.

His mercy to the simple flies; He lifted me up to the skies –

I rest in Him forever!

Full well the Lord has dealt with me; my soul from death He delivered.

My weeping eyes, my stumbling feet, He has redeemed forever.

Forever I before His face shall walk with those who know His grace,

And dwell with them forever.

6 An Upside-Down World

Pray Psalm 116.18, 19.

I will pay my vows to the LORD
Now in the presence of all His people,
In the courts of the LORD's house,
In the midst of you, O Jerusalem.
Praise the LORD!

Read Ecclesiastes 8.14, 15.

Prepare.

1. Two kinds of injustice are mentioned. What are they?
2. What is the most a person could hope to achieve “under the sun”?

Meditate.

Things are not the way we think they're supposed to be; we live in an upside-down world. The world and people were created upright, just the way God planned (Eccl. 7.29). But because of sin, foolish people, through their many schemes, have stood things on their head, and everything is confusion.

Bad things happen to good people, and wicked people prosper (cf. Ps. 73). So, before Rehoboam gets too secure in his inheritance – and all the foolishness he's planning to pursue – he should remember: things don't always work out like you might expect. The best course for those living “under the sun” is that of merriment and diversion (v. 15). Take what each day gives, but don't consider yourself immune to the uncertainties and whims of life.

Another way of thinking about v. 15 is to see it as Solomon's decision concerning his own life, once he began to consider that all around him things weren't the way they ought to be, and before he made his return to the Lord. Why not throw caution to the wind and just “live it up” while he could? As he has been explaining, however, that way is vanity and grasping after the wind.

God alone provides contentment, peace, joy, fulfillment, and complete happiness, regardless of how upside-down our world can become at times (Jn. 16.33). He will make all things work out for justice in the end. The Christian's peace, hope, and joy are a witness, during these days of restoration, of the age of glory, bliss, and perfect contentment which is to come.

But unbelieving people can hardly attain the kind of contentment Solomon recommends. Always striving, grasping, covering their bases, and looking out for Number 1, their days are spent in discontent, anxiety, and even fear. Gratitude and contentment might be the best course for them, but these are impossible to sustain “under the sun”.

It's an upside-down world, and only Christ can set it upright again.

Reflect.

1. Why is it vanity that just people are sometimes treated unjustly? How should you respond if this happens to you?
2. Why is it vanity that unjust people sometimes get away with it all? Do wicked people really escape

the scales of justice? Explain.

3. Solomon uses the phrase “under the sun” twice in verse 15. What does this suggest about the advice he gives there?

In fact, Solomon gives over the entire book of Ecclesiastes to suggesting, with such fullness as he judged adequate, the emptiness of this life, with the ultimate objective, to be sure, of making us yearn for another kind of life which is no unsubstantial shadow under the sun but substantial reality under the sun's Creator. Augustine (354-430), City of God 20.3

Give me contentment, Lord, whatever I must endure in this life, so that...

Pray Psalm 116.1-6.

Give thanks to God, not merely for His many temporal blessings, but for His great salvation, and for the privilege of calling on Him at all times. Recount the many ways He has turned your world rightside-up in Jesus.

Sing Psalm 116.1-6.

Psalm 116.1-6 (*Mit Freuden Zart: All Praise to God Who Reigns Above*)

I love the Lord because He hears my cries and pleas for mercy.

Because He bends to me His ears, my prayers shall ever thus be.

The snares of death encompassed me; hell's grip could not unloosened be;

Distress and anguish pressed me.

I called to God, “O Lord, I pray, my soul redeem with favor!”

The Lord is gracious in His way, and righteous is our Savior.

His mercy to the simple flies; He lifted me up to the skies –

I rest in Him forever!

7 The Needed Perspective

Pray Psalm 116.1, 2

I love the LORD, because He has heard
My voice *and* my supplications.
Because He has inclined His ear to me,
Therefore I will call *upon Him* as long as I live.

Read Ecclesiastes 8.16, 17.

Review Ecclesiastes 8.

Prepare.

1. What can we not find out “under the sun?” Why?
2. What did Solomon learn from his pursuit of wisdom?

Meditate.

Verse 16 is a kind of summary of Solomon’s quest for wisdom, which he has been unpacking since chapter 2. My sense of the phrase “applied my heart to know wisdom” is that this refers to the time of Solomon’s coming to his senses, after the self-indulgent period of chapter 2. “Under the sun” people can’t figure out the scheme of things with any kind of lasting satisfaction. God will not allow them to because they have turned away from Him. This is not to say that unbelievers can’t learn anything; it’s just that they can’t learn it according to the wisdom of God.

God’s ways are mysterious, and they do not make sense to unbelieving people. Only from the “under heaven” perspective can we know that God is wise, good, sovereign, loving, and just, and that all works are His works. He does all things well – everything in its place (Eccl. 3). Our calling is not to be able to know everything, or to figure everything out; rather, we must trust in Him and let His Wind blow us where He will, as we devote ourselves to seeking wisdom.

We are witnessing in our day the supplanting of one philosophical era – modernism – by another – postmodernism (and even postmodernism is now considered by many to be blasé). Ours is an age of uncertainty and confusion because old beliefs are being rejected while the new ones have not yet worked out the answers – and never will. This is why we have so much tribalism and conflict, even in Western societies.

Postmodernism will be rejected in its turn. Meanwhile, the Church continues preaching and teaching the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Believers rest in God and His truth and know peace, joy, contentment, industry, fruitfulness, and blessedness. We do not pretend to know all the answers, but we know Him Who does. Trusting in Him and resting in His Word, we live above the philosophical debates of the day – not unmindful of them, nor uninvolved, simply unaffected in any way that threatens our peace and wellbeing, or that distracts us from living for our King and His Kingdom.

We are called to pursue wisdom, and if we do so “under heaven”, we will surely increase in the knowledge of God, and of all His good and perfect will.

Reflect.

1. How do we account for the fact that unbelievers can discover and learn many good and useful

things?

2. How does the good and useful knowledge that unbelievers discover fall short of being complete and wise?

3. How would you counsel a new believer to devote himself to the pursuit of wisdom? Why should he?

Solomon equates God's work with the activity that takes place on earth. Therefore it should not be surprising that humans cannot fathom God's activity (3:11; 7:25–29; 11:5–8). The Hebrew word translated attempts can also be translated claims or thinks in this context (see 2 Chr. 13:8 where the word is translated think). Earl Radmacher (1931-2014), NKJV Study Notes on Ecclesiastes 8.17

Help me to apply my heart to wisdom, Lord – to be completely devoted to it, so that I can...

Pray Psalm 116.1-19.

Seek the greater salvation of God – that “cup of salvation” – that He has prepared for you. Give Him thanks, and call on Him to keep you in the path of wisdom.

Sing Psalm 116.1-19.

Psalm 116.1-19 (*Mit Freuden Zart: All Praise to God Who Reigns Above*)

I love the Lord because He hears my cries and pleas for mercy.
Because He bends to me His ears, my prayers shall ever thus be.
The snares of death encompassed me; hell's grip could not unloosened be;
Distress and anguish pressed me.

I called to God, “O Lord, I pray, my soul redeem with favor!”
The Lord is gracious in His way, and righteous is our Savior.
His mercy to the simple flies; He lifted me up to the skies –
I rest in Him forever!

Full well the Lord has dealt with me; my soul from death He delivered.
My weeping eyes, my stumbling feet, He has redeemed forever.
Forever I before His face shall walk with those who know His grace,
And dwell with them forever.

Afflicted, I believe His Word, though lying men would undo me.
What shall I render to the Lord for all His blessings to me?
Salvation's cup I lift above and call upon the God of love
And pay my vows most truly.

How sweet to Him when saints depart – save me, Your servant, Savior!
From sin You loosed my wand'ring heart; I praise Your Name forever!
On You I call, my vows to pay; here in Your presence I would stay
Your praise to offer ever.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Life is filled with uncertainties and injustice. How can anyone know peace?
2. Why is death such a threat to people “under the sun”? How should knowing this help us in praying for our lost friends and neighbors?
3. What do we mean by saying that civil government is a “servant of God for good”? What is the believer’s role in helping that to be the case?
4. What’s the difference between merriment and joy? Why is joy only available “under heaven”?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from Ecclesiastes 8? How are you putting that lesson to work in your Personal Mission Field?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.