

# “How Can We Enjoy Life?”

*Ecclesiastes 8:1-17*

We've been stressing that to understand Ecclesiastes you have to keep the whole book in mind and his conclusion to fear God and keep His commands is the way to enjoy life. And every now and then he makes that comment to enjoy life in the present, whatever God has given you in the job and tasks He's given you with the family, friends and resources He's provided for you and we'll see that pop up again here in Ch. 8.

But I'm sure there are those 'Yeah buts' among believers who are not enjoying life. They have distress, pain or are just overwhelmed by the circumstances of the world or their own. That's why Ecclesiastes is so relevant because Solomon doesn't ignore this day-to-day stress we find ourselves in. How can we enjoy life when we live in a world that's so upside down, that thinks evil is good, where we have terrible people in leadership positions in government, education, business, etc., and where new issues of suffering and injustice arrive each day in our news feeds?

Yet, this is what Solomon talks about here in Ch. 8. He talks about these very issues that they faced back then with oppressive governments and life's injustices. And he still says in v.15 enjoy the life God has given you. So let's see what God says through Solomon. How do we enjoy life ...

## **When We Live with Oppressive Authorities?** **(8:1-9)**

V.1 acts as a transition from how the last section ended to how this one begins. Solomon ended Ch. 7 saying how hard it is to find wise people. God made us initially upright but now everyone 'schemes', i.e. breaks God's laws. Who can explain any of this (8:1)? Only wisdom – the knowledge of the fear of God – can. But in saying that it also introduces how with God's wisdom *“it brightens one's face and changes it's hard appearance.”* The word hard means 'strong, forced, stubborn.' When do we force our faces in stubbornness or in an upsetting way? When life doesn't go the way we like it. Like when we have to live under harsh authorities (vv.1-9).

What wisdom does Solomon have for us to not just endure through these times in life but enjoy the life God has given us even when we live with an oppressive government or even those in authority over us in work or other situations? Solomon's long view above-the-sun perspective is

### ***Fear God more and you'll be frustrated less (vv.1-2)***

We know that to be wise means to fear God. Fearing God as we saw last week in Scripture means to be awed by who God is and all that He does for us that you believe Him and want to live as He says to live in His Word. Which also means trusting Him when life seems challenging.

The wise person faces the challenges of oppressive authority and while we sometimes initially react with anger and frustration, we turn to God and His perspective in His Word and to prayer, knowing He's in control and our anger subsides and our faces soften. It's interesting that the word for “hard” is strong, force, because you have to force the muscles in your face to be hard. Our faces are not naturally hard. It takes far more muscles to be grumpy and miserable than it does to be happy. The wise person is one who knows God, goes to God's Word to get His perspective on life. And God says in v.2 and in Rom. 13 and in 1 Pet. 2 to obey the laws our governments make.

<sup>2</sup> *Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God.*

While there is no specific command recorded to take an oath to obey the king, there are many examples of Israel promising to obey Moses, Joshua and even Saul when Samuel presented him as king. The one example we have of swearing allegiance to the king is of Solomon in 1 Chron. 29

<sup>23</sup> *So Solomon sat on the throne of the LORD as king in place of his father David. He prospered and all Israel obeyed him. <sup>24</sup> All the officers and mighty men, as well as all of King David's sons, pledged their submission to King Solomon.*

The kings of Israel were to be God's kings, who were to obey the words of God Himself first. And before we think that we are not commanded to obey kings or whatever our leaders titles are, we come to the New testament in Rom. 13 where Paul commands ...

**13:1** *Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. <sup>2</sup> Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.*

We are to obey our authorities because it brings glory to God. It shows God's people are good citizens. Jeremiah commanded the Jewish exiles sent to Babylon in 29:17 to

*Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."*

Solomon acknowledged that when we obey the laws of our land, generally things go well for us (v.5). We don't obey because we like our leaders but because we love God and they need to know we want to see our towns, cities, provinces, country, world thrive under an orderly society.

However, Solomon was not naïve to think that all kings (including himself!) are kind and wise. In truth, many leaders fall for the sinful lure of power and domination and everything is about them or their agenda. So Solomon acknowledges that when our leaders have unwise laws we

### ***Need to exercise discernment when they are wrong (vv.3-6)***

<sup>3</sup> *Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence.*

There's always protocols and proper decorum when in the presence of world leaders. And even in the presence of employers and teachers and coaches and parents. There are things you say and things you don't say.

*Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases.*

We couldn't have a more recent and relevant example of this when the leader of the Proud Boys, Enrique Tarrio, who organized the attack on the US Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021 was sentenced to 22 years in prison for an attempted coup on the USA government. And others were as well.

<sup>4</sup> *Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, "What are you doing?" <sup>5</sup> Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. <sup>6</sup> For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him.*

Solomon says there is a proper time and procedure to address problems, and Lord-willing the leader will be wise and listen. However, that is not always the case. And I think he's recognizing this when he says one's misery weighs heavy because he or she can't find relief. Solomon is walking a fine line here because he himself was a king. He didn't always make good choices as a person or as a king. His son Rehoboam had to deal with his father's enforced labour of so many slaves to build all his projects. In 1 Kings 12 they approached Rehoboam and said 'Hey, the working conditions under your father were hard. Can you improve them please?' He asked his wise counsellors for their opinion and they said, lighten up. Then he asked his college buddies (who he probably gave cushy jobs) and they said, 'What a bunch of cry-babies! Make them pay!'

The Bible does allow for civil disobedience when we're forced to choose between God and government. And there are good ways to do it and bad ways to do it. We need wisdom when we are faced with these decisions. Because we don't know how long we have to live under these conditions.

<sup>7</sup> *Since no man knows the future, who can tell him what is to come?*

<sup>8</sup> *No man has power over the wind to contain it; so no one has power over the day of his death. As no one is discharged in time of war, so wickedness will not release those who practice it.*

<sup>9</sup> *All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt.*

Solomon reminds us of the mortality rate of all oppressive leaders:

### ***Their 'reign' will end (vv.7-9)***

We don't know the future but God does. In Daniel 2:20, Daniel wisely said

*"Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. <sup>21</sup> He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning.*

As hard as it can be for a believer to live under difficult experiences, every despot and every bad boss' rule will end. In v.8 Solomon acknowledges that we will have to endure these difficult seasons in life. In his under the sun perspective (v.9) Solomon said this is just the way it is.

So if we're going to find any joy in life's difficult situations and seasons we need to trust God when we're frustrated otherwise we'll become hardened and bitter over life. That's what happens if we fail to have the above the sun perspective that reminds us there are times when we can make changes wisely and every unfair leader's reign will end.

Solomon seamlessly moves from unkind leaders to unfair situations. So how can we enjoy life

## **When We Live with Ongoing Injustice? (8:10-17)**

<sup>10</sup> *Then too, I saw the wicked buried—those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless.*

<sup>11</sup> *When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with schemes to do wrong. <sup>12</sup> Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. <sup>13</sup> Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow.*

We don't live in a perfect world. Under poor leadership, the wicked are praised while the righteous are trampled on. Solomon says I've attended the funerals of wicked people, who even went to the temple to worship and then live their godless lives shamelessly, yet they were praised as really good people with emotional eulogies.

In v.11 he returns again to people getting away with crimes and not being punished. And sometimes these people live long lives. It doesn't seem right. However, v.13 is the above the sun perspective,

### ***Only God-fearers escape final judgment (vv.10-13)***

"I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God". 'Reverent' is the same word for fear. When we fear God, know how great and awesome He is, believing in Him and trusting how loving He is towards us, we are secure in Him and know our future will be far better than those who reject God. Death is the ultimate equalizer. And while it's not the most pleasant reminder, it is ultimately a great comfort knowing where you are going in this life and that God tells us to trust Him until that time. This is when all the injustice that has happened to you, around you and in the world will be fairly dealt with.

We love Ps. 23 and often use it to comfort us. But I find as equally comforting Ps. 73. In Psalm 73 we get to know the thoughts of a God-fearing, well-known in his day worship leader, Asaph. The psalm is all about the unfairness he sees around him and his frustration (hard appearance) with God's apparent unconcern and lack of involvement – an under the sun perspective. Listen to some of the things he writes:

*1 Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.*

[His afterwards above-the-sun perspective]

*2 But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.*

*3 For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

*4 They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.*

*5 They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills.*

*6 Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence.*

*7 From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. ...*

*13 Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.*

*14 All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.*

*15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children. [As a leader he felt sharing these thoughts would discourage others. They can't know I have doubts sometimes]*

*16 When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me*

*17 till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.*

What turned him around? What got him to raise his eyes from an under-the-sun perspective to how God sees things? Worship, the Word, encouragement from the people of God. Reminders of what's eternally true in spite of what I physically see.

### ***Only God-fearers escape final judgement (vv.10-14)***

Remember this when things don't change for 'good'. Remember God has a plan and a purpose, ultimately moving us towards His eternal home and our new bodies and completely transformed character into Jesus. And not surprisingly Solomon returns to his core theme in v.15

*<sup>15</sup> So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given him under the sun.*

### **Only God-fearers know joy in the midst of life's perplexities (vv.15-17)**

If we maintain an under-the-sun perspective we will get a hard appearance and worry and live in fear and complain and be bitter about the world. And if we live like that, we will rob ourselves of enjoying the blessing from God (eat and drink, families, friends, etc.) which changes my attitude when I go to work or accomplish the things I need to accomplish. You and I can find

### **Enjoyment in the things we can control (v.15)**

Maybe you have a difficult boss or work environment but they can't rob you of the joy of doing a good job and the personal satisfaction that brings knowing in doing your best you glorified God. Because '*Whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, do it all for the glory of God.*'

And what about the stuff we can't control?

*<sup>16</sup> When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth—his eyes not seeing sleep day or night— <sup>17</sup> then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.*

Solomon says we're limited to understand everything but we know someone who does – God. And even though we can't see His purpose in suffering, oppression and perplexities, we know He has a plan that will end with us in His glorious presence forever and living in a perfect new world. So we can find joy in life's perplexities and have

### **Peace in what we can't control (vv.16-17)**

While there are times for speaking up against the unrighteousness in our world, and God can use that to help our towns, cities and country have better living conditions based on His wise principles, we also understand we may suffer for it and have to continue in a difficult situation.

But God.

*Ps. 11:1 In the LORD I take refuge. How then can you say to me: "Flee like a bird to your mountain.*

*2 For look, the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart.*

*3 When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?"*

*4 The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD is on his heavenly throne. He observes the sons of men; his eyes examine them.*

*5 The LORD examines the righteous, but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates.*

*6 On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot.*

*7 For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face.*

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