

Powerless Ecclesiastes 8

PHBF 03.04.18 Chasing the Wind

Words for kids: powerless, preacher, wisdom, Jesus

Thank you once again for sending the 8 of us to the Charles Simeon Trust workshop 2 weeks ago. The goal was for each of us to take one step forward in our skill in interpreting and teaching God's word. Bigger picture, the goal was to ensure that PH raises up its own teachers and future elders. We'd like to share with you a little of what we learned—both in terms of biblical content and ministry skill—so in 3 weeks (Mar 25) we'll hold a special service on Sunday evening where all 8 of us will take a few minutes and teach through one of the portions of Scripture that we were assigned for the workshop. This particular workshop took us through the book of Revelation, so of course that will be the focus of our teaching—8 brief devotionals on different texts from Revelation.

One thing I was reminded of in the course of our trip was how much I've come to dislike air travel. And I think I finally put my finger on why. It's how powerless I feel when I have to fly. It's not even the actual flying that bothers me—you know, the part where the 100-ton tin can rises into the sky and rides on air? I do feel rather powerless at that moment, but I get the physics and I like the view. It's more the stuff that happens on the ground—the endless lines, the invasive demands, the supremacy of everybody in the room except the paying customers. Even the guys driving the golf carts can boss you around. It's one order after another, from the moment you step into the airport: "ID. Shoes off. Empty your pockets. Step forward, feet on the footprints, hands up, don't move. Stand here. Open your bag. Clear the door, train's leaving." Your seat is assigned. Your seat mates are assigned. You're told when you can stand, when you can use your computer, even what bathroom you can use. If the dude in front of you leans his seat back, your lavish 3 square feet of personal space shrinks to 2 and you're powerless to do anything about it. I'm notoriously edgy when I'm not in charge (it's a character problem, I know!), and so for me the powerless feeling of air travel presents a particular challenge—and opportunity to grow!

It's a goofy example, but I'm sure you can relate. Everyone hates feeling powerless, driven along by forces and circumstances beyond your control. It's the subject we're confronted with in Ecclesiastes 8. It's a chapter for harried moms whose lives have been reduced to endless

laundry and diapers. It's for the person whose boss is never satisfied or whose marriage never seems to get better no matter how hard you try. If your health has taken a turn and you're powerless to do anything about it, Ecclesiastes 8 is for you. Whatever your situation, if you feel helpless and vulnerable, listen up. What we'll find is that God's word not only understands our situation, it offers good news in our struggle.

Before we get into it, let me quickly remind you what we're dealing with in this one-of-a-kind book. Ecclesiastes is essentially a diary—the travel journal of a man called "the Preacher" on his quest for meaning in life. He's an unnamed king in Jerusalem, a conventional Jew who believes that "the whole duty of man" is to "fear God and keep His commandments" (12:13). But, for the purposes of this book, he asks, "What happens if I don't?" To answer that question, he becomes like an actor in a play who has 2 identities: a true self and a role in the play. In his true self, the Preacher loves God and trusts His word; but for the role he's playing in this book, he acts like science and reason are all he needs to find the meaning of life—an approach he sums up with the 3-word phrase "under the sun." What does he find looking at life without God, life under the sun? Vanity of vanities! It's like chasing the wind, to try to find life's ultimate purpose without any input from the God who created it.

Through his diary, he invites us to travel along with him on his journey through life, exploring various options for ultimate meaning and pointing out all the wonderful and tragic features of life under the sun. And in chapter 8, he comes to several of those frustrating situations where you feel powerless. He records four different examples:

- authority figures
- your own future
- popular opinion
- cosmic injustice

Authority Figures

w1-2 *Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed. ² I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him.*

Verse 1 forges a link between chapters 7 and 8—wisdom (ch 7) and

powerlessness (ch 8). Wisdom is a rare and wonderful commodity. When you meet somebody truly wise, you can see it written all over their face. But even wisdom has limited value when you're powerless to change what's happening—like when you're dealing with an authority figure like a king. Why?

vv3-4 *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?"*

The king has absolute authority. None of us is under a king, but we do deal with people who have so much power, no one else has the authority (or the moral courage) to hold him/her accountable and ask, "What are you doing?" So what's the Preacher's advice? "Don't be hasty. Don't take your stand in an evil cause" In other words, be careful. Don't get on their bad side. "An evil cause" here isn't moral evil; it's probably any viewpoint the king/ authority figure disagrees with. The wise move is to just get along.

v5 *Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way.*

Do what they want—"keep their commands"—and you'll survive. This is what wisdom is reduced to when dealing with domineering people. Know anyone like that? Anyone here familiar with these situations? Of course you do. A bad boss, a bad parent, bad cop, bad judge, bad leader. Maybe even a neighbor who tyrannizes the sub or a bully who terrorizes the school. You ask, "What can I do in situations like that?" The Preacher says, "Not much. It's frustrating. Just survive."

In a moment, he'll say more, but for now that's all he offers. Why does the Preacher do this—give us half answers and leave us hanging? It's an important question to help you appreciate this book. Here's why: he doesn't just give us the conclusions he came to from his journey; he actually takes us along for part of the ride. He wants us to feel the tension, the vanity, the frustration of trying to get along in life without God. He wants us to make our heads spin and our hearts ache so we'll cry out right along with him, "I feel like I'm chasing the wind! This is vanity."

That's why there's no clean organizational structure to the book—why the Preacher brings up a topic, deals with it for a moment, drops it and moves on, and then loops back to repeat himself all over again. That

excruciating literary style fits the excruciating nature of his experience! This is a painful journey. His world is falling apart in his hands.

The Preacher is moving toward a conclusion, but his progress is painfully slow and frustratingly inefficient. Just like real life. This is a massive question, this quest to find the meaning of life, and the answers don't come easy for any of us. But gradually, he'll get us there. And thankfully, he offers little hints and helps along the way.

Your Own Future

vv5-6 *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.*

The wise know "the proper time and way" (v5), which is good because (v6a) there is a proper time and way for everything. But we have a problem—something the Preacher calls "man's trouble [which] lies heavy on him." What's the problem all people face when trying to figure out the proper time and way to handle each moment?

v7 *For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?* You don't know what's coming next! How can you possibly handle this moment wisely when you have no idea what's coming the very next moment? In fact, your next moment could be disaster:

vv8-9 *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.*

You could die this week. Do you realize that? War could break out right here. Some powerful evil person could try to harm you and you might not be able to escape. We are powerless in every one of these situations.

There was a merchant in Bagdad who sent his servant to market. When the servant returned, he was white and trembling and said, "Master, just now when I was in the marketplace I was jostled in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. He looked into my eyes, and the look on his face frightened me! Please, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from here to Samarra where Death will not find me." The merchant lent him the horse, and the servant fled. Then the merchant went down to the marketplace, found Death still there, and said, "Why did you threaten my servant when you saw him this morning?" Death answered: "I wasn't threatening him. He startled me. I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra."

It's the grim reality of our lives, friends, and the Preacher keeps coming back to it. Death threatens all the loves, joys, and comforts we rely on to give life meaning. The only possible way to cope is to locate your meaning in life in something that death cannot destroy. I'm glad you're here this morning, because this is the kind of question science can't help you answer. Science tells us what is, not what ought to be. Only religion (and maybe philosophy) can help you find a source of meaning for your life that will last beyond the grave.

Popular Opinion

vv10-11 *Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. ¹¹ Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.*

Ever see a situation like this? The Preacher observes the funeral of a wicked man—a man who used to pretend to be religious, but everybody knew he was a bad dude. But here's the crazy part: In the [very] city where he committed his wicked deeds, everybody praises him at his funeral. "He made the world a better place. We'll miss him." About 6 months ago, a well-known man American businessman died in his 90s—a guy who accrued his wealth from pure vice, who unapologetically objectified women, and who commoditized the most precious expression of covenant love. And people praised him.

It wasn't the first time and it won't be the last that popular opinion goes the wrong way. But the Preacher finds this situation so revolting, it stings him into a rare confession of his own faith:

vv12-13 *Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. ¹³ But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.*

This is the truth of the matter—wickedness won't benefit in the long run. God will bring justice.

But in the meantime, popular opinion rises and falls, and there's nothing you can do about it—in your own case, or in the case of other people.

Cosmic Injustice

As soon as he says (v13), "It will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow," the Preacher knows he has a problem. Sometimes it's not true! Sometimes wicked people live a long time, watching their days stretch out like a shadow as the sun goes down. God doesn't always bring justice in this life:

vv14-17 *There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. ¹⁵ And I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun. ¹⁶ When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, ¹⁷ then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.*

God's ways are so puzzling! Sometimes good people die young and old people live long (v14). The Preacher tried to figure this out, and it kept him awake all night (v16). No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't figure it out. Life is not a tale told by an idiot (contra Shakespeare). It is the work of God (v17). ...but it might be a tale told TO an idiot – even the wisest among us cannot figure it out.

So what do we do?!

Find joy.

v15 *And I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.*

Enjoy the simple pleasures you do have. I hope as a result of our journey through this book, you will savor your food more. Enjoy your meals!! Pause before you dig in and enjoy the presentation, the beauty of the food on your plate. Savor the taste and texture of it in your mouth. Inhale the aromas. Feel the texture. You can't do anything about the authority in your life, the day of your death, popular opinion, injustice in the universe—so let it go and enjoy what you do have. It's been said,

“Everybody dies, but not everybody lives first.” Power is not the key to human happiness. Riches and fame are not the secret. This is!

Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, a Jewish psychiatrist who survived three years in Nazi death camps. Frankl observed that some prisoners endured their suffering and survived, while others did not. What was the difference? Their view of what makes life meaningful made the difference.

Trust in God.

v12 Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him.

To fear God is to remember that He is God and I am not. So trust Him! But how? The *main reason* that Christians insist that God can be trusted in situations where you feel powerless is that God himself has firsthand experience of being powerless.

Philippians 2:6-8 *Jesus,⁶ though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant,¹ being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form,⁸ he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

The Bible tells us the all-powerful God became a near-powerless man – form of a servant, obedient to death. Every form of powerlessness in this chapter He took on Himself—unjust authority, death, popular opinion, cosmic injustice. Why? He—the most beautiful, loving, gracious, wise, righteous Man who ever lived—was suffering unjustly on the cross. And yet, from God’s perspective, it was perfect justice, for He was bearing the sins of all His people.

If your God has not freely yielded up His power, how can you trust Him? On the other hand, if you can find a God who has been powerless, how can you NOT trust Him?

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