

The Life God Has Given

Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

Introduction

As we continue in our sermon series on the book of Ecclesiastes titled, “Getting Over Life Under the Sun,” we are also continuing in today’s theme of family. This might bring up the (rather appropriate) question, “What does Ecclesiastes have to do with family?” Well, Ecclesiastes is an Old Testament book of wisdom that is brutally honest with us about life under the sun, that life apart from God is meaningless. If we, like the author of Ecclesiastes, were to be brutally honest about our families apart from God, we might sound a lot like him. Family life is a complicated thing whether you’re a Christian or not.

So today we’ll be working through Ecclesiastes 8 in message titled, “The Life God Has Given”. Although chapter 8 relates to life in general, in light of today’s theme I’m going to apply it mostly to families. So in a sense, the message could also be titled, “The *Family* God Has Given”. The main idea of this passage is this: Even though life is beyond our control, we can still enjoy it. But once again, in light of today’s application this could also be captured as “Even though *family* is beyond our control, we can still enjoy it.”

The breakdown of the passage looks like this: There is freedom in submitting to those with God-given authority - vv. 1-5, There is freedom in releasing that which we cannot control - vv. 6-9, 16-17, and There is freedom in embracing the life that God has given - vv. 10-15. In light of working through an entire chapter, rather than standing to honor the reading of God’s word, let’s posture our hearts to receive God’s word as we move through it one verse at a time.

May the Word preached here today echo in our hearts and among the nations. And all God’s people said, *Amen*.

Exposition

I’d like to begin today with a story that I often tell my children. But it’s actually not my story--it comes from Lynn and Suzanne Groce. When they were living in Africa, one day they were visiting the Awash River with their children. Their oldest son Les was standing at the shore of the lake when Suzanne noticed something large moving toward him in

the water...it was a crocodile. Terrified, Suzanne screamed for Les to come to her, and he immediately obeyed--right before the crocodile's jaws clamped down on him.

I tell that story to my children to teach them how important it is to obey mommy and daddy, and that our commands aren't just to be mean, they are for their good. There is freedom in submitting to parents' authority. That's because God has given parents that authority, ultimately so that we learn from the beginning of our lives about the importance of God's authority.¹

I. There is freedom in submitting to those with God-given authority - vv. 1-5

This brings us to the first stopping point in this passage, that there is freedom in submitting to those with God-given authority. Look at verse 1 with me:

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. Ecclesiastes 8:1

Because of how negative it seems the Preacher has been throughout his book, we might be tempted to hear these rhetorical questions and respond, "No one--no one is like the wise; and no one knows the interpretation of a thing."² But the second half of this verse shows us that's not what he meant. He is pointing us to someone who truly has wisdom from God, and what they're like.

And although we might expect him to say something like, "If you want to be wise, downsize to a tiny house and become a hermit on Walden Pond,"³ instead he teaches something really ironic. Wisdom can take the hardness of life, the hardness that is reflected in the wear and tear on our faces, and it can make it shine.⁴ To behold wisdom is to behold God, and to behold God brings us to life. It's like how a sunflower droops at night, but rises to attention at sunrise. The Bible speaks of this elsewhere, such as Psalm 34:5:

¹ Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 6:4-7

² Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, Loc 2698-2702

³ Wikipedia, "Walden," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walden>

⁴ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, 182; Proverbs 15:13

Those who look to [the Lord] are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed.

Psalm 34:5⁵

In fact, the theme of the face runs throughout the Bible and has much to teach us about relating to God. It's reflected significantly in the priestly blessing of Numbers 6, where one of the lines read,

[May] the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, Numbers 6:25

God created us to live "before his face," so to speak. Think about how we are meant to learn this from the very beginning of our lives. A healthy childhood is one lived before the welcoming faces of our mother and father; faces that say, "I have made space for you, I care about you, I have given you access to me because you are mine." If you have children, just think about how much they scream (often literally) for your attention. If you are a child, think about how much you want the attention of your parents (--most of the time).

On the other hand, when this is not our childhood experience, think about how much it hurts us. Consider the person who learned to trust no one because there was no mother or father who ever came when she cried. Or perhaps the person who's still haunted by the look of disappointment on his father's face. How we experience life before the faces of our parents--for better or worse--often then shapes how we view the face of God. And so life before the face of an authority, such as parents, is meant to teach us to relate to the ultimate authority: God himself.

The Preacher continues explaining this in verses 2-5:

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. Ecclesiastes 8:2-5

In teaching us about relating to authority, the Preacher uses the example of the highest authority of his day, the king. And yes, much of his reasoning for submitting to the king clearly includes not putting your life in danger. The "word of the king is supreme"--he can say one word and you're dead meat, so why would you stand against him?! But that's not where the Preacher's reasoning starts.

⁵ Ryken, 183

He begins by telling us to submit to the king “because of God’s oath to him.” With a little help from Paul’s letter to the Romans, today we can see clearly what the Preacher meant. He was referring to God’s oath not just to a particular king, but to all kings and rulers. Check this out, Paul says,

1 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, 4 for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Romans 13:1-4

So our submission to God-given authority on earth is part of our submission to the authority of Jesus in heaven.⁶ God calls us to fight against our sinful tendency to buck authority and break the law and dishonor leaders; this keeps us approved and away from evil.

Now, is there ever a time to resist authority? Absolutely--as Peter put it so simply in Acts 5:9, “We must obey God rather than men.” But even then we must seek “the proper time and the just way” to do so. This isn’t easy! God’s demand that we live under authority is meant to show us just how hard-headed we are. We need more than a class on model citizenship--we need a Savior King to straight up crush the rebellion in us.

And these same principles apply within families. For example, childhood is a like a constant exploration of boundaries--“How far can I resist?” If this doesn’t resonate with you because you yourself or your children were very compliant, just think about...*the teenage years*. Teenagers, my heart goes out to you. How can you be under the authority of your parents while progressively growing toward no longer being under their authority--without blowing up a few times? That is so hard. But it’s meant to show you how much you need a Savior.

Or, how about marriage? Remember the vows you exchanged on your wedding day? Of course not! If we did, we’d just feel guilty about how much we break them. The marital vows to which the Bible calls us say that a wife should respect and submit to her

⁶ Ryken, 185

husband, and a husband should love and honor and submit himself to meeting the needs of his wife, even if he must lay down his life to do so.⁷ Submitting to *these* commands--wow, what a perfect opportunity to see just how selfish we really are! And owning our selfishness is a significant step toward seeing our need for a Savior King. My friends, there is freedom in submitting to those with God-given authority.

II. There is freedom in releasing that which we cannot control - vv. 6-9, 16-17

This brings us to our second stopping point in this passage: there is also freedom in releasing that which we cannot control. Look at verse 6 and 7 with me:

*6 For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him.
7 For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?* Ecclesiastes 8:6-7

A few weeks ago we walked through the most famous passage in Ecclesiastes, the poem in chapter 3 about there being a time for everything. We learned then that the point of the poem isn't *our* control over time, but God's control over it.⁸ So what the Preacher is acknowledging here in chapter 8 is that even though the seasons of our lives are in God's hands, we still tend to be troubled because we can't control the present nor the future.⁹

We need wisdom to know the proper timing of things--so we can make good decisions and know when to embrace what comes our way and know when to fight back against what comes our way. In American culture we love to present ourselves as having life figured out, but it's mostly a front to hide our deep insecurities. Deep insecurities about things like this:

8 No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death [in other words, the reality that no matter how well we take care of ourselves, or how we avoid dangerous things, we have no control over the arrival of our death]. *There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it* [for soldiers this is particularly troubling because their duty is to dangerous things and there's no escape]¹⁰. *9 All this* [the Preacher continues] *I observed while applying my heart to all*

⁷ Ephesians 5:22-33; 1 Peter 3:1-7

⁸ Bradley Bell, "Beholding God At All Times, Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

⁹ Greidanus, Loc 2740-2743

¹⁰ Ryken, 188

that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt. Ecclesiastes 8:8-9

And that's the thing about God-given authority in a world gone wrong. It's often used for the hurt of others. This should lead us to lament, crying out, "This isn't how it should be!" And American culture is doing a lot of that right now, calling out injustice. And some of it is good. But for the Christian, we don't have the privilege of anarchy. Wherever it doesn't force us to disobey God, we are called to submit to and honor God-given authority--in the church, in the government, in the family. But figuring all that out lies heavy on us. It did the same for the Preacher. Listen to his words in verses 16 and 17:

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. Ecclesiastes 8:16-17

So how do we know? How do we know when to submit and when to resist? Well first, there is wisdom in controlling that which God has called us to control. For example, when is the right time to fight for a marriage to work, and when is the right time to leave an abusive or adulterous spouse?¹¹

Just in the past few months this has been a major public issue among Christians. That's because it came to light that Paige Patterson, the former president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, had generally discouraged women from divorcing in cases of abuse, and that, specifically in response to a female student who was raped, Patterson "did not report it, discouraged her from doing so, and urged her to forgive the perpetrator."¹²

In response, some people didn't see a problem with his actions. But I want you to know on behalf of the pastors, this was a shameful misuse of control. The kind of control that should have taken place here would have been coming alongside such women to stop the bleeding, beginning with reporting such abuse to the authorities. As we observe

¹¹ Ryken, 187

¹² Kate Shellnutt, "Paige Patterson Fired by Southwestern, Stripped of Retirement Benefits," <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/may/paige-patterson-fired-southwestern-baptist-seminary-sbc.html>; Kate Shellnutt, "Divorce After Abuse: How Paige Patterson's Counsel Compares to Other Pastors," <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/april/paige-patterson-divorce-domestic-abuse-swbts-cbmw.html>

things like this and the #MeToo movement, we are actively taking steps to prevent such injustices here at Antioch. It's good and wise for us to control that which God has called us to control.

At the same time, however, there is wisdom in releasing that which God has not called us to control. For example, as parents we can be overly sensitive--even paralyzed--by our desire to control the outcome of our children. Our motto is "Train up a child in the way he should go [and] even when he is old he will not depart from it."¹³ And we cling to it like it was a promise instead of just a word of wisdom. And sure, as parents we have the awesome privilege of shaping our children in so many ways, but you know as well as I do that ultimately we cannot make decisions for them, and we cannot change their hearts.

Once when I was sick with worry at how my vices were going to mess up my kids, I talked with a pastor who said to me, "The mistakes of parents is a significant part of how God brings people to himself--just think about your own story." What a God, who can take even our worst and use it for his good! Yes, there is heaviness in not being able to control everything, but there is freedom in releasing to him that which we cannot control.

III. There is freedom in embracing the life that God has given - vv. 10-15

This brings us to our third and final stopping point this morning: there is freedom in embracing the life God has given. The Preacher starts to teach us this beginning in verse 10:

10 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. 12 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. 14 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. Ecclesiastes 8:10-14

¹³ Proverbs 22:6

As usual with the Preacher, before he can give us something positive, he's got to express his raw observations about life under the sun. He has seen that because justice often comes slowly from both God and man, people are set on evil without fear of consequences. They sin over and over, and yet seem to thrive, as though rewarded by God. The Preacher has watched the wicked using authority to hurt others (v. 9). And he has watched them die--and finally, the wicked get what's coming to them, right? No! Even then, says the Preacher, they are given a funeral with a grand procession and burial and praise from the people.¹⁴

To see this backwards mess, and to still trust in a good God, takes more than human wisdom.¹⁵ It's a leap of faith! It's a trust in heavenly wisdom. It's a trust that says (there in verse 12), "I know [not "I see"] that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before [his face--and he sees them]."¹⁶ And I think it's this desperate faith that leads him to his conclusion in verse 15:

And I commend joy, for man has nothing better 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. Ecclesiastes 8:15

Joy--in the midst of a crooked world that can't be straightened. Joy--in the midst of backward injustice. Joy--not over what God hasn't given, but what he *has* given. Joy--over the actual spouse--and children--and parents--and relatives that God has given you, not the ones you want them to be. Or, joy over the life God has given you without the spouse or children or parents or relatives you've wanted.

Conclusion

Perhaps that is an unsatisfactory conclusion for you. If you're in a season of particularly painful family dynamics, then it should be. In fact, if we were to end here, then this same message could probably be taught by a rabbi in a synagogue. We would left groping for the faint outline of God's face.

But the limitations that the Preacher had to grapple with in his day are blown from their foundations in the second half of this book, the New Testament. Whereas the Old Testament believer at best could find freedom and meaning in embracing the mystery of

¹⁴ Greidanus, Loc 2766-2771

¹⁵ Greidanus, Loc 2779-2783

¹⁶ Ryken, 196-197

God's plan and groping for the shadow of his face, the New Testament believer can feast their eyes upon him. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus Christ

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, Hebrews 1:3

And once when Jesus was about to go to the cross, one of his followers,

8 Philip[,] said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." 9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. John 14:8-9

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was the wisdom that would've made sense of the world for the Preacher.¹⁷ It was the way in which God would restore us to life before his face. So when we entrust our lives, our families, our everything to Jesus, look at how it builds on today's message. Paul says,

12 Since we have such a hope, we are very bold [not just eating and drinking and being joyful--there's more], *13 not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end* [referring to when Moses' face would shine after he had talked with God, but only for a short time]. *14 But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant* [that is, the Old Testament], *that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away* [--only through Christ can we see God's face]. *15 Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. 16 But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.* *17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom* [Remember what we have learned throughout Ecclesiastes 8: there is freedom in submitting to those with God-given authority; there is freedom in releasing that which we cannot control, there is freedom in embracing the life that God has given. Here, in Paul's words, is the source from which all that freedom flows: the Lord himself; the Lord who comes to dwell in us--*in the midst* of our struggles, *in the midst* of our family dysfunctions. He comes, not to free us from our situations, but to free us to live before his face as beloved children, reminding us constantly, "I have made space for you, I care about you, I have given you access to me because you are mine." And here's where the boldness comes in (verse 18):]. *18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.* 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

¹⁷ Matthew 13:16-17

As beloved children we don't have to hide our faces in shame or hatred of his authority. Even though life (and family) are beyond our control, we can still enjoy it, because the Lord is using it all to show us his face.

Who is wise? Who knows the interpretation of a thing? You do. Because you know on the night Jesus was betrayed, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it, broke it and gave it to his disciples and said to them, "This is my body, which is broken for you; eat this in remembrance of me." He also took a cup of wine, and after blessing it, gave it to his disciples and said, "This cup is the new covenant marked by the shedding of my blood. For as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you announce the Lord's death until he returns." **We are announcing that Jesus Christ is the life God has given.**

Our tradition here at Antioch is to come forward and break off a piece of bread and dip it in the juice. There will be stations here in the front; gluten-free bread will be available to your right. If you're a baptized believer, come and remember what Jesus has done for you. If you're a believer but not yet baptized, let us know so we can help prepare you for baptism and communion. If you're not a Christian, this sacred symbol is not for you, but rather than taking communion, we encourage you to take Christ. He has made himself available to you this very moment. There will be pastors in the back and people to pray with you on the sides. Let's pray.

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