

LESSON 6

When Life Seems Unfair

Scripture Focus

Ecclesiastes 6:1—8:15

Key Verse

“Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him” (Ecclesiastes 8:12).

Overview

Solomon examined several alleged unfair variations in life. He observed that prosperity is not always as good as it appears because it does not necessarily provide true enjoyment. On the other hand, he noted that supposed problems are not always as bad as they might appear. Humans need wisdom to manage life, but they don't always find it. The truly wise person lives within God's structure and does not give up on life.

Topic

Submission to God

Theme

The believer should submit to God even when life seems unfair.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will commit to praying about submitting to God in the areas of prosperity and problems.

Outline

- I. Prosperity Is Overrated (Eccles. 6:1–12)
 - A. Situation (6:1, 2)
 - B. Suppositions (6:3–6)
 - C. Satisfaction (6:7–9)
 - D. Sovereignty (6:10–12)
- II. Problems Are Undervalued (Eccles. 7:1–14)
- III. Wisdom is Good but Rare (Eccles. 7:15–29)
 - A. Focus of wisdom (7:15–18)
 - B. Profit of wisdom (7:19–22)
 - C. Rarity of wisdom (7:23–29)
- IV. Submission Is Wise (Eccles. 8:1–15)
 - A. Instruction (8:1–3)
 - B. Reasons (8:4–8)
 - C. Application (8:9–14)
 - D. Exhortation (8:15)

Materials

- Transparencies 1 and 9
- Ecclesiastes 8:12 verse cards from resource CD
- Lesson 6 case study from resource CD
- A sweet treat and a vegetable

Getting Started

Use the following ideas to introduce this lesson.

Contrasting Takes Ecclesiastes 6–8:15				
	Prosperity	Problems	Wisdom	Submission
Society				

Societal Values

Transparency: Display transparency 9 with the bottom half covered. Divide the learners up into groups of four or five. Assign each group one of the four categories on the transparency. **Ask:** What are society's attitudes toward prosperity, problems, wisdom, and submission? Have each group discuss their category and be prepared to share their thoughts later in the lesson.

A Matter of Taste

Object Lesson: Display a sweet treat (e.g., donut) and a vegetable (e.g., broccoli). **Ask:** What makes the donut more desirable than the broccoli (for most people)? Which one is ultimately better for you? **Discuss:** How do the donut and broccoli represent life? (*Direct the learners to the idea that prosperity, like a donut, is good at first but doesn't leave us satisfied. And problems, like the broccoli, are not always easy to swallow but can help us grow in life.*)

Searching the Scriptures

In this section of Ecclesiastes, Solomon presented his third observation of life. He examined prosperity and found that people vastly overrate its benefits. On the other hand, they fail to recognize that problems are not always as bad as they fear. He challenged his readers to pursue the rare quality of wisdom that would enable them to enjoy life, even in the face of all that seemed unfair.

I. Prosperity Is Overrated (Eccles. 6:1–12)

TRANSPARENCY: Display transparency 9 with the bottom half covered. Ask the groups who were assigned the section on prosperity to share their thoughts. (Record their summaries on the transparency.) Reveal the bottom portion of the prosperity column as you present the information below.

Contrasting Takes Ecclesiastes 6–8:15				
	Prosperity	Problems	Wisdom	Submission
Society				
God's Word	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Satisfaction is unrelated to prosperity. Enjoy what you have. Be content. 			

In Ecclesiastes 5:10–17 Solomon developed five principles about the disadvantages of riches, but he balanced them with an optimistic conclusion in 5:18–20. Chapter 6 also speaks about how prosperity is not always as good as it appears. The realistic view is often pessimistic.

A. Situation (6:1, 2)

Solomon focused on widespread evil, which seems to be a flaw in God's plan. He had seen it often, so here he discussed it.

Solomon observed that many times humans have riches, wealth and honor, but they are unable to enjoy these advantages. He did not disclose the specific

reason for their inability to enjoy their resources, but he did remark that only a stranger gets to partake of those resources.

READ: Have a learner read Ecclesiastes 6:1 and 2. **ASK:** To what did Solomon compare the prosperous life? (See the last phrase in verse 2.) **DISCUSS:** What does Solomon teach us about prosperous living apart from God by comparing it to a disease? (Questions 3, 4)

As Solomon stated in 5:19, the ability to enjoy life is a gift from God, and the inability also is ultimately caused by God. Solomon, a poor rich man, learned through painful experience that wealth without enjoyment is emptiness.

B. Suppositions (6:3–6)

Solomon expounded on his point by discussing two possible situations. He did not describe actual lives. He presented them as “what if” possibilities.

First, he presented the scenario of a man who lived many years and had one hundred children. This man had two advantages over the person described in verses 1 and 2. First, he had a family who would inherit his wealth. Second, he had a long life. However, Solomon reported that even this man had no enjoyment in life and did not receive a respectful burial. Despite all of his seeming advantages, his life was more tragic than a miscarriage.

Solomon explained this startling assessment in Ecclesiastes 6:4 and 5. A child of a miscarriage would never suffer the emptiness of a life without joy. To be at rest as a stillborn, Solomon said, was better than living in frustration. It is better to have no days than to have negative longevity.

The second example in verse 6 features a man who lived two thousand years without enjoyment. Though this person might have lived twice as long as Methuselah (Gen. 5:27), no length of time can make up for the lack of the quality of enjoyment. All people will eventually die regardless of how long or brief their lives are. In death there is no chance to make up for lost opportunities to enjoy life.

C. Satisfaction (6:7–9)

Solomon’s examples of people failing to enjoy life raised the question of how a person can attain satisfaction in life.

READ: Have a learner read Ecclesiastes 6:7. **ASK:** According to this verse, is man’s desire for satisfaction a physical problem or a spiritual problem? **COMPLETE:** Trying to satisfy one’s soul with material goods is like trying to . . . (e.g., quench your thirst with a bucket of sand.) (Question 5, 6)

In Ecclesiastes 6:7 Solomon affirmed that human effort alone cannot fill the emptiness. All the things for which people labor cannot satisfy.

This sense of dissatisfaction affects all classes of people—the wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor (v. 8). Human wisdom does not necessar-

ily guarantee that a person will find enjoyment. On the other hand, material poverty is not necessarily a hindrance to enjoyment. Satisfaction is unrelated to what a person knows or to what he possesses.

This reality led Solomon to state a principle: It is better to appreciate things from a distance than to be frustrated by desiring what is beyond your grasp. In other words, enjoy what you have, rather than crave what you cannot have (v. 9).

Still, this principle is hard to accept. As Solomon commented, it is “vanity and vexation of spirit.” Nevertheless, as he continued toward his final conclusion in chapter 12, he exhorted his readers to be content within the limits that God has set. We do not have the answers to all of life’s puzzles. Instead of vainly seeking to work or buy our way to satisfaction, we need to submit to God to enjoy the life that He has given to us.

D. Sovereignty (6:10–12)

In order to enjoy life, people need to recognize God’s control over them (v. 10). When God created humans, He named them man and woman. As Genesis described it, God made Adam out of the ground and then made Eve out of Adam’s rib. Humans, then, from the start were formed and shaped by the sovereign God.

Because of this, we need to submit to God in our thoughts and in our words. Fighting against the sovereign God leads only to frustration, not to advantage (v. 11).

In verse 12 Solomon asked two rhetorical questions: Who can tell a person how to have a good life? and Who can tell a person what his future will hold? The answer to both of these questions is nobody but God. Earthly life is like a shadow before the night of death. Only God knows the secret to the good life today and the prospect for our lives tomorrow.

DISCUSS: What factors sway people to trust in money rather than in God? (Question 7)

II. Problems Are Undervalued (Eccles. 7:1–14)

TRANSPARENCY: Display transparency 9 with the bottom half covered. Ask the groups who were assigned the section on problems to share their thoughts. (Record their summaries on the transparency.) Reveal the bottom portion of the problems column as you present the information below.

Contrasting Takes Ecclesiastes 6—8:15			
	Prosperity	Problems	Wisdom
Society			
God's Word	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfaction is unrelated to prosperity. • Enjoy what you have. • Be content. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems are not as bad as they might appear. • Problems force us to consider what is important in life. • The problems we try to avoid can be beneficial. 	

After discussing why prosperity appears better than it is, Solomon looked at the other side of the picture. In Ecclesiastes 7:1–14 he wrote a number of proverbs that fit around the theme that problems are not as bad as they might appear. Once again, Solomon wanted to probe life to learn its true meaning.

For example, he said in verse 2 that it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting. This sounds strange on the surface,

for people prefer a party over a funeral. However, Solomon said that a funeral forces people to consider the important issues of life. Therefore, the aspects of life that we try to avoid can actually be most beneficial for us.

Problems force us to consider what is important in life. They sometimes jolt us from normalcy and cause us to face reality. We spend time and energy trying to avoid or ignore problems when problems can often benefit us.

DISCUSS: How can problems benefit our Christian growth? How can believers help each other view problems in a positive light? (Questions 8, 9)

III. Wisdom Is Good but Rare (Eccles. 7:15–29)

TRANSPARENCY: Display transparency 9 with the bottom half covered. Ask the groups who were assigned the section on wisdom to share their thoughts. (Record their summaries on the transparency.) Reveal the bottom portion of the wisdom column as you present the information below.

Throughout Ecclesiastes Solomon tried to point his readers toward godly wisdom. Only this kind of thinking can see through the vanity of life and come to a sense of fulfillment. However, this wisdom is rare among humans.

A. Focus of wisdom (7:15–18)

Solomon acknowledged that righteous people do not always have long, full lives, but wicked people may seem to prosper (v. 15). This was one of the enigmas of life that perplexed him.

TESTIMONY: How do you feel like responding to God when a young person who was living for the Lord dies suddenly from an accident or gets a terminal disease? (Question 10)

Solomon cautioned his readers not to lose their focus on genuine wisdom. Verse 16 sounds almost as though Solomon were counseling against wisdom. However, he was actually stating that true wisdom and true righteousness go beyond pious appearance. Phony piety is ruinous. On the other hand, resisting God's way by following wickedness and folly leads to destruction (v. 17).

In verse 18 Solomon exhorted his readers to grasp two things at once: follow God's way and avoid the way of folly. This kind of commitment is what he believed constitutes the fear of God.

B. Profit of wisdom (7:19–22)

Solomon continued the theme of wisdom by describing the profit of wisdom. Solomon viewed wisdom as more effective than might for meeting life's challenges. A wise man can face life more successfully than ten strong men who lack wisdom (v. 19).

Contrasting Takes			
Ecclesiastes 6–8:15			
	Prosperity	Problems	Wisdom
Society			
God's Word	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfaction is unrelated to prosperity. • Enjoy what you have. • Be content. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems are not as bad as they might appear. • Problems force us to consider what is important in life. • The problems we try to avoid can be beneficial. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • True wisdom is following God's way. • Avoiding folly. • True wisdom is rare.

In verse 20 Solomon linked the concept of righteousness to the concept of wisdom. He observed that not one just person existed on earth. He implied that wisdom is not something that comes from within a person. Wisdom comes from God, and it provides direction and true profitability in life that is otherwise missing.

One area in which a lack of wisdom and righteousness is most easily seen is a person's speech.

READ: Have a learner read James 3:2–8. **ASK:** How does James illustrate the inability of all men to control their tongues? Why is a person's speech a good indicator of his or her lack of wisdom? (Questions 11, 12)

Careless speech is universal. Therefore, according to Solomon, we should not get overly upset by what others say (Eccles. 7:21). We have to honestly say that we have failed at this point (v. 22). Wise speech is certainly profitable, but it is not always practiced.

True wisdom, which comes from being rightly related to God and from fearing Him, is the only way a person can be successful in life.

C. Rarity of wisdom (7:23–29)

Solomon knew much about wisdom (Eccles. 1:12–18), but he found it unsatisfying and futile. It did not bring answers to his questions or peace to his heart. Consequently, he found that finding true wisdom required more than simply determining to be wise (7:23). As Job 28:12–28 demonstrates, true wisdom is inaccessible except to God. God must give wisdom, for it lies beyond human discovery.

Solomon searched as widely as he could to locate wisdom and those who possessed it. What he saw most were the seductions of human folly that brought moral and spiritual destruction to many people (Eccles. 7:26). He concluded that extremely few men or women ever find God's way. Instead of submitting to God, they seek innumerable paths that avoid God's wisdom (vv. 27, 28).

The rarity of wisdom is not God's fault. He created us with the capacity to know Him. He has spelled out what He requires and has provided the grace man needs to live pleasing to Him. However, people have rejected God's way in order to follow their own foolish impulses (v. 29).

Being wise means stepping out of the crowd, focusing on God's Word and following His straight and narrow way. Few people choose that way, but those who do, find the rewards were worth the self-sacrifice.

Contrasting Takes		Ecclesiastes 6–8:15			
		Prosperity	Problems	Wisdom	Submission
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfaction is unrelated to prosperity. • Enjoy what you have. • Be content. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems are not as bad as they might appear. • Problems force us to consider what is important in life. • The problems we try to avoid can be beneficial. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • True wisdom is following God's way. • Avoiding folly. • True wisdom is rare. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submission to God includes submitting to authorities over us. • God will make sure that justice is achieved in the end.

IV. Submission Is Wise (Eccles. 8:1–15)

TRANSPARENCY: Display transparency 9 with the bottom half covered. Ask the groups who were assigned the section on submission to share their thoughts. (Record their summaries on the transparency.) Reveal the bottom portion of the

submission column as you present the information in the commentary below.

A. Instruction (8:1–3)

Solomon observed that the wise understand how to live. They may not have all the answers to life's questions, but this lack of answers does not cause despair. Wisdom has changed them from stubborn resistance to cheerful contentment in God's will.

In Ecclesiastes 8:2 Solomon advised his readers to keep the king's commandment. According to Psalm 89:19–21, God has vested authority in human governmental leaders. Because of this fact, wise people who fear God are under obligation to submit to the authorities over them. Although there may be times that Christians must choose "to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29), they must not be hasty to oppose the authorities that God has ordained (Eccles. 8:3).

B. Reasons (8:4–8)

In verses 4–8 Solomon offered two reasons why man should submit to authorities. In verses 4 and 5 he reasoned that a ruler's position demands obedience from his subjects. A king has a significant amount of power over those whom he rules, for he is able to treat them kindly or harshly (Prov. 16:14, 15). Therefore, it is only prudent to submit cheerfully to him.

The second reason is that much of life is impossible to discern (Eccles. 8:6–8). Only God can govern life perfectly, because we cannot see life fully. In a sense, the best of people are blind leaders of the blind (v. 7).

In verse 8 Solomon cited four examples of how man is unable to control life. He cannot control the physical environment, determine the time of death, avoid calamities, and use wicked means to escape problems. No amount of human energy can guarantee a secure life.

ASK: How high a view of themselves do most politicians have today? In listening to campaign speeches, would you conclude there is anything they don't think they can do? Who is usually blamed when a politician fails to live up to the high expectations he or she promised? (Questions 13–15)

Part of the way in which the Lord brings order out of this seeming chaos is through government (Rom. 13). Even though the leaders may be unaware of how God is working through them, or their subjects may not recognize the sovereign hand of God, it is wise to submit to the program that God has established.

C. Application (8:9–14)

Solomon's instruction to submit to authorities raises the obvious question: Why does government seem to produce inequities? If this is God's system, why is there so much injustice in the world? Solomon admitted in verse 9 that injustice does indeed occur in government. However, this realization did not

lead him to reject the system that God had established.

In verse 10 Solomon pointed to the fact that wicked people, who seem so powerful, eventually die and become forgotten. They may seem invincible for a while, but they, too, live within the structure of God's rule. The Lord will execute justice at last.

Solomon acknowledged that in the short run there are apparent injustices (Eccles. 8:11). People do break the rules and seem to get away with it. Nevertheless, no one can sin and ultimately go unpunished (vv. 12, 13). Only those who reverence God are truly successful in life. It is a painful reality that life does seem unfair, for just men sometimes are treated badly while wicked people prosper (v. 14). But the wise person looks beyond present circumstances and sees a sovereign God.

D. Exhortation (8:15)

Just as Solomon concluded his first two observations of life on a positive note (Eccles. 2:24–26; 5:18–20), so he brought his third observation to a point of hope. Once again he focused on enjoying life as a gift from God (v. 15). Even though life is imperfect in this sinful world, he affirmed that the person who fears God must not abandon God or become sour on life. Instead, he must enjoy what God gives, even when he cannot figure out all that is happening.

Use the case study for lesson 6 as desired.

Contrasting Takes <small>Ecclesiastes 6–8:15</small>			
	Prosperity	Problems	Wisdom
Society			
God's Word	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfaction is unrelated to prosperity. • Enjoy what you have. • Be content. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems are not as bad as they might appear. • Problems force us to consider what is important in life. • The problems we try to avoid can be beneficial. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • True wisdom is following God's way. • Avoiding folly. • True wisdom is rare.
	Submission		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submission to God includes submitting to authorities over us. • God will make sure that justice is achieved in the end. 		

Principles for Life and Love	
1. Recognize the need to have a Christ-centered life.	8.
2. Break out of the circles of life by living for God.	9.
3. Find true enjoyment in life by surrendering to God.	10.
4. Trust God with your life—even the difficult aspects.	11.
5. Recognize the folly of living for money and things.	12.
6. Show wisdom by submitting to God.	13.
7.	

Making It Personal

Humble Submission

Transparency: Display transparency 9. Review the contrasting takes. Point out that how we respond to the potential for prosperity and the reality of problems determines whether or not we are wisely submitting to God. In other words, you cannot claim to be wisely submitting to God while you are seeking satisfaction in prosperity or trying to avoid problems at all costs.

Encourage learners to show wisdom by submitting to God in the areas of prosperity and problems. Have them identify which one they struggle with the most and commit to praying about it over the next week. (Question 16)

Review Transparency

Use transparency 1 to review the Principle for Life and Love for this lesson: Show wisdom by submitting to God.

Memory Verse

Distribute copies of the Ecclesiastes 8:12 verse card from the resource CD. Encourage the learners to memorize the verse.