

## The Benefits of Fearing God

Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

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About a week ago, an Edgewood member and I were riding an elevator with another guy. He asked how we were doing and we replied in unison, “*Better than we deserve.*” He didn’t know quite how to take that response. We mentioned how everything we have is a gift from God. As the elevator reached the lobby, he asked us if we were ready for the election. We were both searching for a gospel bridge but before we could answer he declared, “*I have all my guns, and I purchased my ammo so I’m ready to go.*” Neither of us knew how to respond but were thankful we were no longer in the elevator with him!

To clarify, while it’s certainly OK for people to defend themselves, the look on his face said he was ready to do something drastic if his candidate lost.

According to a new *Forbes Health* survey, more than 60 percent of respondents said their mental health has either been “slightly, moderately, or significantly negatively impacted” by the upcoming election. Nearly half reported feelings of anxiety. An annual poll from the American Psychiatric Association found a similar trend: 43 percent of surveyed adults said they feel more anxious than they did the year before, an increase from 37 percent in 2023. An overwhelming 73 percent of those surveyed said the 2024 election makes them anxious, while 70 percent said they feel anxious about current events in general.

Here are some words that describe what many are feeling – *fear, anger, disgust, distrust, frustration, embarrassment, apathy, sadness, and hostility*. One blogger who is a believer commented, “*We live in a culture where snipers live behind laptops and smartphones. Fewer people are interested in debate, and more are looking for enemies to eviscerate.*”

Here at Edgewood, we don’t hesitate to speak into moral matters as we seek to be convictional about sin and compassionate toward sinners. That’s why we hosted the Holy Sexuality Conference two weeks ago and it’s why we hold to the inerrancy and authority of Scripture, God as Creator, the sanctity of life, the protection of the preborn, gender as determined by God in the womb, marriage as one man and one woman, and the exclusivity of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone. Our aim is to live on mission as we go deep in God’s Word while applying it to our world.

While I don't hesitate to preach on these matters, I admit I am a bit apprehensive to preach on politics because this topic has become so explosive. I've been helped by a post I read this week by Chris Castaldo called, *Help for Pastors in an Election Year*. Here are a few excerpts.

*[Pastors are] pressured from both the political left and right to align their preaching and ministry with partisan expectations. This sometimes consists of demands to endorse specific candidates or to denounce others. More often, however, it's subtle expectations to speak out against political and cultural 'enemies.' The message pastors are hearing is clear: conform to these expectations or be labeled a coward. In today's highly partisan digital age, pastors fear that a wrong or ill-considered word could jeopardize their ministries.*

*The pressure pastors face isn't only normal; it's an immense privilege...though pressure is both common and necessary, we must remain resolute in our identity as ambassadors of King Jesus...in these turbulent times, our allegiance to Scripture and the gospel must be our defining characteristic...this commitment calls us to boldly proclaim God's Word, ensuring we don't allow ourselves to be reduced to partisan mouthpieces. It requires us to courageously speak God's Word without falling into the trap of aligning our ministries with a political party.*

*Who is sufficient for such things? We certainly aren't. Nonetheless, here we stand. As Martin Luther declared, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God." Not everyone in the congregation will be pleased—and that's OK. As a friend of mine once put it, "Pastoral ministry is the art of disappointing people at a rate they can absorb."*

I'm convinced God wants me to address this topic (otherwise I wouldn't be courageous enough to do so). You're free to disagree with me but do so courteously. My aim is to please an audience of One. Let me make two preliminary points.

- **I'm a pastor, not a political pundit.** While I do follow politics with great interest, my understanding is pretty basic. But that's OK because my calling is to be a pastor. The word "pastor" means *shepherd* and as such, my two primary responsibilities are to spiritually *lead* and Scripturally *feed* the sheep

entrusted to me. 1 Peter 5:2 says: ***“Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you...”***

- **By the time I’m finished, some of you will think I went too far, while others of you will think I didn’t go far enough.** Related to this, I won’t share who I’m going to vote for and have never used the pulpit to proclaim my political views. That’s not to say that I don’t receive pressure to do so. I participate in the political process *and* trust in God’s providence as Daniel 2:21 says: ***“He changes times and seasons; He removes kings and sets up kings...”***

I recognize that this topic can be emotionally explosive and so I want to make an appeal for us to be open to what the Bible has to say.

Let’s not look at the Bible through Republican or Democratic lenses [hold up red and blue plates]. We want to always view life through the lens of the Bible [hold up clear plate].

As we’ve said before, *what you believe about God’s Word will determine how you view the world around you. If your worldview does not come from God’s Word, it will come from the world.*

Here’s our main idea: *Only personal conversion through Christ, not political conviction, will lead to lasting change.*

Here are some principles from Ecclesiastes 8 which will keep us grounded during this political season. Isn’t the Lord marvelous that we’re in this passage this weekend?

**1. Reflect wisdom.** If we’re going to navigate well during these dark days and tumultuous times, we’re going to need God’s wisdom. We see this in Ecclesiastes 8:1: ***“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 heart is changed.”*** Solomon begins with two rhetorical questions to help us see our need for God’s intervention and His interpretation of things.

As Joseph said in Genesis 40:8: ***“Do not interpretations belong to God?”*** Daniel 2:28 says, ***“But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries.”*** Let’s embrace

the invitation found in James 1:5: ***“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”***

When God gives His wisdom to us, it makes our faces ***“shine,”*** which is the idea of having a ***“sunny countenance which gives off light.”*** Psalm 34:5 says, ***“Those who look to Him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed.”*** Even a stern face is softened when God shines His face upon us.

Earlier this week, Beth and I heard Cathy Thomas recall how the Lord saved her. While watching a dramatic play about the life of Christ, she was impacted by what she saw on the faces of the actors. She told us they had “faith faces,” meaning their faith was all over their faces, as they glowed with the love of God. Here’s the phrase she used: ***“I saw faith on their faces.”*** That led her to getting saved that very night. I’m reminded of Proverbs 15:13: ***“A glad heart makes a cheerful face but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed.”***

As we move toward election day, do you have a faith face or a fear face? Is your face hard or is it happy? Is it stern toward those who have different political persuasions, or is soft toward people made in God’s image and likeness?

*Only personal conversion through Christ, not political conviction, will lead to lasting change.*

**2. Respect government.** Let’s give our attention to verses 2-9: ***“I say: Keep the king’s command, because of God’s oath to him. <sup>3</sup> Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. <sup>4</sup> For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, ‘What are you doing?’ <sup>5</sup> Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. <sup>6</sup> For there is a time and a way for everything, although man’s trouble lies heavy on him. <sup>7</sup> For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.”***

In short, we’re to submit to the governing authorities over us. In Solomon’s time, the king was the absolute ruler who demanded obedience to his commands. Proverbs 19:12 puts it like this, ***“A king’s wrath is like the growling of a lion, but his favor is like dew on the grass.”*** In light of that, it’s not wise to cross a king or

take a stand for evil things. Verse 4 says, ***“For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, ‘What are you doing?’”*** It’s always best to stand for what is right, recognizing ***“there is a time and a way for everything”*** as stated in verse 6. Daniel is a good example for us because he maintained his convictions by not compromising but was also respectful to the governing authorities and willing to suffer.

1 Peter 2:13 says, ***“Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and praise those who do good.”*** However, when God and government diverge, we’re to obey God as Peter and John did in Acts 5:29: ***“But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than men.’”***

We can apply the phrase there is ***“a time and a way”*** to the upcoming election because this is a time for citizens to make their voices heard. In preparation for this section of the sermon, I’m going to incorporate some insight from four sermons I’ve listened to. I also went back and read a sermon I preached eight years ago and will be pulling in some points from that message.

In an effort to communicate a more tender tone, I’m going to sit down for this part of the message.

**A. Voting is a stewardship issue.** One way we respect our government is to take the responsibility to vote. Before going further, I’m grateful to those of you who have served in our military to protect our freedoms, including the right to vote. I can’t imagine how hard it must be for you to hear people say they don’t participate in the political process.

It’s our privilege to vote and its one of the main ways to influence and improve our country. Unfortunately, in 2020, at least 25 million Christians did not vote. In a blockbuster report by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona State University, it’s expected that 32 million Christians who are regular churchgoers do not plan to vote in November.

Deuteronomy 1:13 describes the importance of choosing wisely when we do cast our ballots: ***“Choose for your tribes wise, understanding, and experienced men, and I will appoint them as your heads.”***

I appreciate the perspective of one pastor when he wrote:

*“When Ecclesiastes was written, perhaps the most common form of government was an absolute monarchy. The world has shifted away from absolute monarchies to more democratic forms of government. Even though the forms of government have changed, the principles taught concerning matters of procedure and due respect are no different. Democracy in many respects provides procedures for the people under authority to express their concerns and dissent through petition, peaceful gatherings, and voting among other things. For this matter, Christians should exercise these civil liberties to help bring about change for the better and help empower people who represent the ways of God in government and ultimately in laws.”*

I like what Samuel Adams said about voting: *“Let each citizen remember at the moment he is offering his vote that he is not making a present or a compliment to please an individual - or at least that he ought not so to do; but that he is executing one of the most solemn trusts in human society for which he is accountable to God and his country.”*

Here are some reasons to vote...

- **Vote biblical values.** We love truth, we love what is right, and we’re trying to live rightly in an upside-down world. As John Stonestreet says, *“Ideas have consequences and bad ideas have victims.”* Allie Beth Stuckey says it like this: *“Politics matter, because policy matters, because people matter!”*
- **Our particular government requires the participation of its citizens to function properly.**
- **Voting is a way to influence government for good.**
- **Vote your conscience.**
- **Vote for the good of your neighbor, which includes the unborn.**

I was helped by another pastor who offered this additional insight.

- **Vote on principles, not promises.** Discern how a candidate makes decisions and then vote for the one whose principles most closely align with biblical principles.
- **Vote on policies, not personality.** The presidential election is not a personality contest.
- **Vote on facts, not feelings.** Vote on how they will govern, not how they make you feel.

It was Edmund Burke who said, “*All that is required for evil to prevail is for good men to do nothing.*”

**B. No president or elected official will provide everything we’re looking for.** As Chuck Colson used to say, “*Salvation will not arrive on Air Force One.*” We can find comfort in Psalm 146:3-5: “***Do not put your trust in princes, in human beings, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing. Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God.***” No politician, political party, or president will, or can, meet all our needs. Political promises will evaporate, and expectations will go unmet because we live in a flawed and fallen world. That’s really the message of Ecclesiastes. Our help and hope must always be in the Lord our God.

**C. God is supremely sovereign.** I’d like to give a fail-safe promise and prediction for what we’ll wake up to on November 6. You ready for it? You better lean in, so you don’t miss it: *God will still be on His throne!* In the middle of his lament over the loss of Jerusalem, Jeremiah wrote these words in Lamentations 3:22-23: “***The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.***”

The Almighty will accomplish His purposes, no matter who is president. Remember that He used evil rulers like Cyrus and Caesar, even Nebuchadnezzar and Nero, to fulfill His will. He has worked out His purposes under every condition imaginable from Egypt to Babylon to Rome, through world wars and every circumstance. We might feel things have been taken out of our hands, but they *have not been taken out of God’s hands.* Proverbs 21:1: “***The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He will.***”

Write this down – *Jesus is not running for President, but He is running the universe.* Psalm 22:28: “***For kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.***”

**D. Christians should be the best citizens.** Ephesians 4:32 says, “***Be kind to one another, tenderhearted...***” Galatians 6:10: “***So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.***” And Romans 12:21 says, “***Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.***” A person who votes differently than you do is not your enemy. And even if you think they are, you’re called to love your enemies.

How many of you have read *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis? The book is made up of imaginary letters written by an older demon named Screwtape to his young understudy, Wormwood. The letters are filled with sinister strategies to knock Christians off track. I came across this paragraph written by someone who imagined what Screwtape would write in our political climate today.

*My Dear Wormwood, be sure that the patient [the Christian] remains completely fixated on politics. Arguments, political gossip, and obsessing on the faults of people they have never met serves as an excellent distraction from advancing in personal virtue, character, and the things the patient [the Christian] can control. Make sure to keep the patient in a constant state of angst, frustration, and general disdain towards the rest of the human race in order to avoid any kind of charity or inner peace from further developing. Ensure the patient continues to believe the problem is 'out there' in the 'broken system' rather than recognizing there is a problem within himself. Keep up the good work, Uncle Screwtape.*

**E. Our primary commitment must be to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.** While we must care about our country and be involved in elections, let's never forget the three cornerstone commands given by Jesus Christ.

- **Love God with everything we have.** Mark 12:30: *“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”*
- **Love others as we love ourselves.** Mark 12:31: *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* There is no other commandment greater than these.” I should point out that these first two are really *one* command – if we say we love God then we *will* love others.
- **Make disciples of all nations.** We show that we love God and love others by going with the gospel to those who are lost. Matthew 28:19-20: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* Remember we're to live on mission as we declare the multicultural gospel – to our neighbors and the nations.

I appreciate Pastor Chris' insight: *“Are we more worried about someone's political position or their eternal position? Are we looking to have a political conversation or a gospel conversation?”*

The church's primary task is evangelism and discipleship. While we're prone to divide people according to political affiliation, the Bible classifies people according to whether they are believers or unbelievers, as saved or lost. Our task is to win people to Jesus, not to prove that our political views are right.

Often, we get so worked up that we forget our role is to be a winsome witness. Evangelism is God's primary way to deal with the world's problems. One pastor writes, *“Remember, if Jesus said we'd be known as his disciples by our love for one another, what does it tell the people around us when we are as hostile and divisive as everyone else?”*

I'm greatly challenged by Colossians 4:5-6: *“Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is our shining moment! Let's live as missionaries in the midst of a messed-up world. Our primary posture must be missional, not political. Let's love God, love others, and lead the lost to the Savior.

**F. Keep politics in perspective.** When we see governing authorities doing things that we don't understand, or people getting elected we don't agree with, remember this promised prophecy from Isaiah 9:6-7: *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end...*”*

Our hope is not in an elected president, congress or the Supreme Court but in the Coming King! When Jesus returns, He'll set up a one-party system with Him as Lord of all. Revelation 1:5: *“Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.”*

**G. We need revival in the church and an awakening in our land.** Psalms 85:6 says, *“Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?”*

**H. Recognize there are two kingdoms in conflict.** I've been helped on this point by an excellent book by Chip Ingram called, *Culture Shock*. When Jesus was arrested and brought before Pilate, He spoke of another kingdom in John 18:36: ***“My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”***

Pilate became flustered and frustrated by Jesus' vague and veiled responses and so he challenged Christ in John 19:10: ***“Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?”*** I love how Jesus answers in verse 11: ***“You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.”***

Jesus is continuing to build His spiritual kingdom, and this kingdom is often in conflict with earthly kingdoms.

**I. Christians have a dual citizenship.** As Americans, we do have rights and privileges afforded us, and we should take advantage of them by voting and being involved in the political process. But as born-again Christ followers, we are first and foremost citizens of heaven as Philippians 3:20 says: ***“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.”***

1 Peter 2:11 says we are aliens, pilgrims and sojourners. We need to build a theology of exile and ask ourselves, *“What does it look like to thrive in Babylon?”*

*Only personal conversion through Christ, not political conviction, will lead to lasting change.*

Let's go back to our text in Ecclesiastes 8.

**3. Revere God.** The call to fear God is found throughout the Bible. It's important to revere God, especially when our government is not godly. Join me in verses 10-11: ***“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. <sup>11</sup> Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.”*** Solomon is disturbed when he sees the wicked given beautiful funerals and flowery eulogies. He's also troubled when he observes how consequences are not enforced for bad behavior. Police officers will tell you that when someone commits a crime and there is no punishment, the

offender often goes back to it, thinking he or she can get away with it. The slower the legal system moves, the quicker the crime rate rises.

As he contemplates all this, he comes back to the same conclusion he has many times before in verses 12-13: ***“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. 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.”*** As we defined it last week, to fear God is to revere Him as we’re called to have a “trembling trust” in Him.

**4. Release joy.** Instead of being filled with fear or anxious about the election, we’re called to be joyful in verses 14-15: ***“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. 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.”***

Even if things don’t turn out like we want them to, or when our candidate doesn’t win, we are urged to be joyful. This is counterintuitive, isn’t it? One commentator writes, *“While we live in a crooked world filled with sinners and corrupt governments, the temptation would be to wait it out with as much bitterness and dourness we can muster.”* Instead, we’re called to enjoy life and to enjoy our labor. We see this 3:12-13: ***“I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man.”***

That reminds me of a testimony someone shared with me a couple years ago: *“I ran into an old friend who was NOTHING like I remembered him, and he was literally glowing with joy! I had to have whatever he had, and what he had was Christ!”*

**5. Remain faithful.** Even when we don’t know what will happen, or why things don’t always make sense, we’re called to remain resolute in our faith in verses 16-17: ***“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, 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.***

As we pointed out last week, God's ways are often mysterious and difficult to understand. In verse 17, we're reminded three times that we cannot ***"find it out."*** This is an emphatic statement, meaning we will often struggle to put all the puzzle pieces together. Brothers and sisters, no matter what happens, we must remain faithful as 2 Corinthians 5:7 says, ***"We walk by faith and not by sight."***

I appreciate the wisdom of a pastor who said, *"Trust God whether the best candidate wins or not...trust His sovereignty, trust His goodness, trust His power, and trust His plan...hold fast to Jesus and to His Word. Hold fast to His people and hold fast to His promises."*

Jesus said it like this in Revelation 2:25: ***"Only hold fast what you have until I come."***

If you were to ride an elevator with someone and they were to ask if you're ready for the election, how would you respond? Let's summarize what we learned. *Only personal conversion through Christ, not political conviction, will lead to lasting change.*

1. Reflect wisdom.
2. Respect government.
3. Revere God.
4. Release joy.
5. Remain faithful.

During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was purportedly asked if God was on his side. *"Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side,"* said the President, *"my greatest concern is to be on God's side, for God is always right."*

Lincoln then called our divided country to a national day of prayer, fasting, and humility because America had become *"intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God who made us. It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves...to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness...for the pardon of our national sins and the restoration of our now divided and suffering country to its former happy condition of unity and peace."*

In light of that, listen to Jeremiah 29:7: ***“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”***

I’d like to invite everyone to the QC Prayer Meeting Sunday night (October 20) at 6:00 pm at Bridge Cities Church in Bettendorf. A number of gospel-preaching churches will be present to pray together.

### **Closing Prayer**