

“Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly.” —Ecclesiastes 8:12 (NASB)

Robert Morgan, a Florida-based air traffic controller, was on a break when an emergency call came in from a single-engine Cessna on its way to the Bahamas. The pilot was unconscious, and the person making the call, Darren Harrison, had no idea of how to fly the airplane. None of the other passengers had flying experience either. When Morgan picked up the call, Harrison told him directly, “I don’t know how to fly. I don’t know how to stop this thing if I do get on the runway.” The most Harrison could say is that he’d seen other pilots fly.

Morgan pulled up a picture of the Cessna 208’s instrument panel and began explaining it to Harrison. First, Morgan had to explain the basics of keeping the plane steady and the dynamics of ascent and descent. But before any landing could be attempted, traffic control had to locate the plane.

Once the plane was located, Morgan decided to guide Harrison to Palm Beach International Airport for an attempted landing. It was the biggest airport in the region, giving Harrison “a really big target to aim at.” With no experience and little time to learn, Harrison had to rely completely on the instructions given over the radio by someone far removed from the situation. The objective was almost impossible. Pilots of small aircraft practice dozens of hours with flight instructors before they land their first plane. But together, Morgan and Harrison landed the plane—flawlessly. It was a feat that astonished air traffic control and all the other pilots watching the event unfold on the ground and from the air. (Adapted from <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/florida-passenger-lands-plane/index.html>.)

In a way, this remarkable story illustrates Solomon’s key emphasis in Ecclesiastes 8. The chapter is full of important insights for living life in world that groans under the curse of sin. Solomon provides instruction on a host of issues, but fundamental to it all is the need to *walk by faith*—or in terminology more consistent with Ecclesiastes, to *walk by fear*, the *fear of God*. In Ecclesiastes 8:1–17, Solomon does applaud *wisdom* for the practical benefit it brings to life. But repeating what he has already established in the preceding chapters, Solomon emphasizes that wisdom has its limits and that the fear of God is ultimately the key to enjoyment in life. As it was for would-be pilot Darren Harrison, in life’s most precarious moments, when faced with inability and lack of expertise, the key to success is whole-hearted trust in the instructions given from above. To get to this emphasis, we must trace Solomon’s *insights for living*.

I. Seek That Which Brings Joy (8:1)

As chapter 7 came to a close, Solomon emphasized *the scarcity and limitations of wisdom*. Not only are there mysteries that wisdom cannot explain (7:23–26), but all humanity is stained by a depraved disposition, making the acquisition of wisdom almost impossible (7:27–29).

Solomon’s words in Ecclesiastes 8:1 serve as a summary of that reality and at the same time signals a transition to another new section of his book. He first writes, **“Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter?”** (v. 1a). Solomon begins with two rhetorical questions—both of which assume a negative answer. *Question*: Who is like a wise man? Who can explain the enigmas of life? *Answer*: Almost no one!

Yet even though Solomon himself has experienced a lot of failure in his life by the time he writes Ecclesiastes, he is not rejecting the value of wisdom—as rare and elusive as it is. After his realistic description of the rarity of wise men, he goes on to state in the affirmative, **“A man’s wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam”** (v. 1b). Indeed, wisdom is something to pursue! It is of tremendous value! It **“illumines”** the one who acquires it, allowing him to walk life’s dark paths with confidence. Moreover, wisdom **“causes his stern face to beam.”** The variegated pains of life cause the face to furrow and darken, but it is wisdom—Solomon asserts—that causes the

man's face to shine. That his face "shines" indicates the *tenderizing nature* of wisdom. Wisdom makes men hardened by pain into *gracious* men. Indeed, wisdom is rare, and it has its limits. It is not the ultimate solution to life's problems. But it is still worth pursuing, because it is one of God means of bringing *joy* to men's lives.

II. Respect Those in Authority (8:2–6)

Solomon now proceeds to convey some wisdom of his own—wisdom related to an issue of life where many struggle. Solomon turns to the topic of *respect for authority*. In 8:2–6, Solomon delivers six rules related to rulers:

- A. Rule #1: Obey the law. **"Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God"** (v. 2). In language echoed in the instructions given in the New Testament (see Romans 13:1–15; 1 Peter 2:13–17; Titus 3:1), Solomon calls upon his readers to follow the laws of the land. The **"oath"** he mentions is probably a reference to one's *sworn allegiance* to his king. That God takes such "oaths" seriously has already been established by Solomon in 5:2–6. As you keep your promises, you'll keep the law.
- B. Rule #2: Listen to instruction. **"Do not be in a hurry to leave him"** (v. 3a). A sign of disrespect is to walk out of the room as the king is still speaking. Therefore, Solomon counsels his readers not to turn their backs on authority figures and not to think that their own business is more important than their ruler's business. In a culture prone to anarchy, Solomon's insights are particularly worthy of recovery. Give your leader your time.
- C. Rule #3: Do not undermine his authority. **"Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases"** (v. 3b). The **"evil matter"** Solomon has in mind probably relates to planned disobedience to the king's instruction, or at worst, to the plotting of a mutiny (see Proverbs 24:21–22). Why? Because God has given rulers authority to make decisions and enact laws according to their pleasure.
- D. Rule #4: Do not ridicule his authority. **"Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, 'What are you doing?'"** (v. 4). Solomon also warns against ridiculing the king's decisions. The prohibited question, "What are you doing?" is no honest inquiry. It reflects a heart of rebellion—the kind expressed in the rebellious sinner's heart as he asks God, "What are You doing?" (see Isaiah 45:9–10; see Romans 9:20–21). In fact, it really is no question at all; it is an *assertion* disguised as a question.
- E. Rule #5: Earn the right to be heard. **"He who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure"** (v. 5). Of course, no human ruler is impeccable. Solomon previously stated that all humanity is sinful (7:20), and rulers are easily corrupted (5:8–9). But for a citizen to have a platform to appeal to the king in light of an unjust decision, one must have a record of trustworthiness—of "keeping" the commands. This platform of loyalty will provide **"the proper time and procedure"** (see 3:1).
- F. Rule #6: Wait for the right moment to appeal. **"For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight [lit. matter], though a man's trouble is heavy upon him"** (v. 6). Recalling that there is a *right* time for everything (which assumes that there is also a *wrong* time for those things; see 3:1), Solomon warns his readers to be careful in making appeals to authority. Yes, a man's **"trouble"** may be **"heavy"** because of the king's actions. But Solomon instructs that even appeals over unfair decisions (such as those in 5:8–9) requires prudence.

III. Acknowledge Your Inability (8:7–9)

Solomon's insights about how to relate wisely to authorities is humbling. But he doesn't stop there. The next section of these insights for living humble the reader further. Instead of giving his readers a boost in their self-esteem ("Believe in yourself!" "Never set limits!" "All boundaries are self-imposed!"), Solomon provides six illustrations that show how *unable* man is. Acknowledging these truths regularly is necessary for success in life.

- A. Exhibit #1: You cannot predict the future. **"If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen?"** (v. 7). God alone knows what and when things will happen (Isaiah 46:9–11).
- B. Exhibit #2: You cannot control the climate. **"No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind"** (v. 8a). God alone controls the wind, and He can do it with the wind itself (Psalm 135:7).

- C. Exhibit #3: *You cannot delay your death.* **“No man has . . . authority over the day of death”** (v. 8b). God alone determines the extent of a man’s days (Deuteronomy 32:39).
- D. Exhibit #4: *You cannot ignore your enemies.* **“There is no discharge in the time of war”** (v. 8c). War is one of the most humbling scenarios for man. Not only does he not have a choice about whether he fights, but the outcome is never guaranteed. God alone enjoys absolute freedom to do as He pleases, and He always is successful in His endeavors (Psalm 103:19). No enemy stands against him.
- E. Exhibit #5: *You cannot escape sin’s consequences.* **“Evil will not deliver those who practice it”** (v. 8d). Many think they can harness the power of evil for their own purposes, but sin is deceitful. It always leaves man with the bill. On the contrary, God alone is incapable of evil but is absolutely righteous (Habakkuk 1:13).
- F. Exhibit #6: *You cannot resist injustice.* **“All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over *another* man to his hurt”** (v. 9). Lord Acton famously stated, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Give man an ounce of authority and he will typically use it in some way to promote himself at the expense of his neighbor. God alone is not corrupted by power; His exercise of it always demonstrates righteousness (Ecclesiastes 7:29).

IV. Leave It in God’s Hands (8:10–13)

Not only is man characterized by inability, but now Solomon presses deeper into his reoccurring emphasis on the limitations of wisdom itself. He begins by stating a couple of perspectives from *wisdom’s vantagepoint*. He begins by summarizing what can be viewed *by observation*—from what Solomon **“has seen”**:

- A. Observational Reality #1: *Sinners appear to pass out of this life without consequences.* **“So then, I have seen the wicked buried, those who used to go in and out from the holy place, and they are *soon* forgotten in the city where they did thus. This too is futility”** (v. 10). These **“wicked”** men are *hypocrites* who **“go in and out”** from the temple. But their lives end in such peace that they are **“forgotten.”** They pass on before judgment comes. They are not remembered for crashing and burning.
- B. Observational Reality #2: *Delayed justice appears to perpetuate evil in the present.* **“Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil”** (v. 11). Solomon already acknowledged man’s depravity (7:20, 29), and that God does judge (3:17). But according to what *he sees*, the slow grinding of the wheels of justice *appears* to have a self-defeating purpose. At the observational level, God’s patience *appears* as permissive.

These observed realities show the limitations of wisdom and its cause-and-effect emphasis. Observation of life “under the sun” will not be enough to make sense of life, especially of all the exceptions to the law of retribution. Therefore, knowledge from “above the sun”—from God Himself—is essential. This is why Solomon now shifts from what **“I have seen”** to **“still I know.”** He shifts from knowledge gleaned from observation to knowledge received through revelation:

- A. Revelational Reality #1: *Only those who truly fear God will be saved in the end.* **“Although a sinner does evil a hundred *times* and may lengthen his *life*, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly”** (v. 12). Sinners may *appear* to live long, prosperous lives. But what is important is not what *appears to be* (**“I have seen,”** v. 10), but what is *true* (**“still I know,”** v. 12). Solomon again points to the **“fear”** of God (and not “wisdom”) as the ultimate solution. This “fear” is inspired by the revelation of God (Psalm 19:9).
- B. Revelational Reality #2: *Those who do not fear God will be decisively judged in the end.* **“But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God”** (v. 13). Although sinners *appear* to live long and prosperous, *in truth* God controls their destiny. As God Himself has revealed, at the appointed time, and not a moment later, the sinner will receive the full penalty for his evil.

This contrast in 8:10–13 between “wisdom” (limited) and “fear” (ultimate) reminds us of Solomon’s larger purpose in Ecclesiastes. Wisdom is not in itself salvific. Valuable, absolutely! But not salvific. *Fear*—the Old Testament conceptual equivalent of *faith*—recognizes man’s inability and places all one’s hope in God.

V. Get on with Life (8:14–15)

Solomon now presses further into the reality that wisdom will not save you:

- A. The Unexplainable Perplexities: *Under the sun, the righteous often suffer adversity while the wicked often prosper. “There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility”* (v. 14). Solomon reminds his readers that there are things which God has “bent” which cannot be “straightened” (remember 1:15; 7:13). He acknowledges that these things are part of life outside the Garden—part of the fleetingness of life under the curse—and therefore unresolvable from the perspective of wisdom.
- B. The Appropriate Response: *Those who fear God are not to try to solve life’s enigmas, but to enjoy life’s gifts. “So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life which God has given him under the sun”* (v. 15). Solomon issues another *carpe diem*—“seize the day!”—text (see 2:24–26; 5:18–20). Despite life’s many unresolved dilemmas, including adversity and suffering experienced by those who fear God, Solomon “commends” (literally, “strongly advocates”) the enjoyment of the things God gives in this life. Solomon’s argument is that enigmas can exist alongside enjoyment. True fearers of God can and must enjoy the simple pleasures of life. These are good gifts, and enjoyment is a matter of stewardship. But the effort to solve the enigmas of life will only lead to worry, stress, anger, and madness.

VI. Walk by Faith (8:16–17)

Solomon ends where he began—with a recognition of wisdom’s limitations (see 8:1a): “**Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, ‘I know,’ he cannot discover**” (v. 17b). Wisdom is a kind of “walking by sight”—walking by *situational awareness* and *the skill of applying truth* to what is beheld. Indeed, wisdom has definitive value (see 8:1b), but it is not the ultimate solution. The *fear of God*, and not *wisdom*, is what enables man to enjoy life.

Hear the Preacher!

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| 1. Acquire wisdom for the right reasons. | 4. Bow in affectionate reverence before God’s sovereignty. |
| 2. Learn to live peacefully under authority. | 5. Steward your life by enjoying God’s gifts. |
| 3. Remember your creaturely, sin-stained status. | 6. Live by God’s promises, not by your observation. |

For Discussion

1. Wisdom is described as “causing a stern face to beam” (Eccles 8:1b). How would you describe your face?
2. Review Solomon’s six “rules” for respecting authority. Which ones need special attention in your life?
3. Mortifying pride is perhaps the greatest ongoing challenge Christian men face in life. In its place, humility must be cultivated. How do the six “inabilities” listed by Solomon in Ecclesiastes 8:7–9 help in this regard?
4. Charles Bridges defined the *fear of God* as “that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly to his Father’s law.” How does this fear enable you to leave your circumstances in God’s hands?
5. Solomon calls upon us to *enjoy life* in the context of *fearing God*. Explain how these two concepts go together.

Audio, Video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: March 20, Called to Lead mini-series, pt 5: “Leadership in the Workplace” (Chris Hamilton)