

“Wisdom Makes a Face Shine”

Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

Turn with me in your Bibles this morning to the eighth chapter of Ecclesiastes. I want to take the remainder of the summer and finish our study through this wonderful book of the Old Testament. Ecclesiastes is puzzling for many, but once we understand the purpose, the book becomes a great treasure that points us to the hope we have in Jesus Christ. Solomon, the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, shows us that life cannot be explained simply from an ‘under the sun’ prospective. We need wisdom from beyond the sun. We need the perspective of heaven to properly navigate life on earth.

In chapters 7-8, King Solomon uses the words ‘wise’ and ‘wisdom’ around 18 times. From here to the end of chapter 12, he uses the words 35 times, which is more than twice as many times as it is found in the first six chapters. His theme in these chapters is the practicality of God’s wisdom. Wisdom makes a difference in the life of the one who has it. Wisdom shows up in a person’s attitudes and decisions. Wisdom impacts what a person believes, which in turn affects how that person behaves. Solomon expresses this truth when says here in verse 1, “A man’s wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.” In other words, the wisdom of God transforms a person’s life.

Some years back, there was an essay that was written by a prominent atheist about something strange that he had observed while doing humanitarian relief in a war-torn part of Africa. The name of the guy was Matthew Parris, and he wrote a piece for The Times entitled, “Why Africa Needs God.” The man is an avowed atheist, but he admitted that Africa needs God. Even though he made it clear that he doesn’t believe in God, he admitted that Christianity made a tangible difference in the lives of those he encountered while there. Not only did he admire the work of Christian missionaries he met, but he also said that something was attractive and winsome in their demeanor. He wrote:

“The Christians were different. Their faith appeared to have liberated and relaxed them. There was a liveliness, a curiosity, an engagement with the world...Whenever we entered a territory worked by missionaries, we had to acknowledge that something changed in the faces of the people we passed and spoke to: something in their eyes.”

Gospel wisdom that is present in the life of a believer has brought about transformation. It makes the face ‘shine.’

Matthew 5:16—**“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”**

Solomon describes this kind of wisdom here in chapter 8 and refers to it as the wisdom that makes the face shine, the kind that comes from God and changes a man or woman. According to what he writes, wisdom involves:

1. TRUSTING what you can’t see (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 face is changed.”

Notice the question that Solomon begins with here as he asks, “Who is like the wise?” No one wrote more on the subject of wisdom and its practical benefits than Solomon did. He shows us here how true wisdom impacts a person. Who is like the wise? Who knows interpretation of a thing?

“Interpretation”—*comes from an Aramaic word that means solution; someone who sees through the mystery of something*

The word suggests knowing how to explain difficult things, having the ability to unfold mysteries, understanding how to get to the foundation of things. It is the person who knows why things are as they are.

To be sure, he's not referring to the one who is wise in his or her own eyes, something that the Bible frequently warns us against.

Proverbs 3:7-8—“Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and depart from evil. It will be health to your flesh, and strength to your bones.”

Proverbs 12:15—“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel is wise.”

Proverbs 25:12—“Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”

The wisdom that the Preacher is describing here isn't the kind that you come up with on your own. He's referring to godly wisdom. The one who is truly wise is changed by the wisdom of God, and even their face reflects it. The one who is in possession of God's wisdom has a changed countenance.

“Shine”—*word means to illumine; same word used in Gen. 1:15 to describe the way that the sun radiates light; also used in Ex. 25:37 to refer to the lamps in holy place*

Notice that Solomon says, “A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.” He's not talking about a 'happy face' that is based strictly on emotion or circumstances. Rather, it is this idea that the wisdom of God makes a difference in the way that people live and look. It is something you have on the inside that is working its way out. The one who lives without God in the world often lives with a proud countenance, and sin has taken its toll. The 'hardness' of his face is the result of the hardness of his heart. He needs to be changed inwardly.

The face of the wise shines outwardly because of the glory of the Lord that has been shone inwardly.

Numbers 6:24-26—“The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace.”

Under the Old Testament system, the priests were given the privilege of serving at the altar and ministering in the sanctuary, but they were instructed to bless God’s people in His name. This priestly blessing is fulfilled in Christ!

The word for ‘peace’ is the Hebrew word ‘shalom’ and is one of the greatest words in all of language. It means so much more than the absence of trouble. It refers to a quietness of heart within, spiritual blessing, strength for the demands of life, and the kind of joy that transcends the circumstances of life. Only Jesus can provide this.

Wisdom finds its origin with Him. The one whose face shines with wisdom, the one whose hardness of face is changed, is the one to whom God has revealed Himself. Just like the moon reflects the light of the sun, so also does the one who trusts in Jesus reflect His wisdom.

Michael Eaton—“...the Preacher contrasts the face of a hardened sinner with the wise man who is visibly gracious in his demeanor, and whose gentleness is obvious in his facial expression.”

Psalm 34:5—“I sought the Lord, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears. They looked to Him and were radiant, and their faces were not ashamed. This poor man cried out, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.”

Gospel wisdom brings a joy to a person’s life that changes everything. It makes a difference in your habits and in the things that you love and leads to reordered priorities. It makes a difference in your witness, showing others the joy of

knowing Jesus Christ. It makes a difference in your relationships with other people, and no longer do you use people for what they can give you.

Those who live with God's wisdom have an inner joy that radiates. It begins by trusting what you can't see.

2. OBEYING what you can't understand (8:2-7)

"I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him. Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, 'What are you doing?' Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?"

Wisdom involves trusting what you can't see, and then it involves obeying what you can't understand. Beginning in verse 2, Solomon uses an illustration from the royal court to show how wisdom obeys and relates to authority. Just as God's wisdom in your life means that you trust what you can't see, it also means you obey what you can't always understand. Wisdom lives with a sense of humility that knows when to submit and obey, even in circumstances where one lacks understanding.

There was no authority higher than that of the king. In verse 2, Solomon says that wisdom demands that a person keep the king's command because of God's oath. It could be a reference to the promise that God made when He put His king on the throne. God had sworn to David and his descendants that one of his sons would sit upon Israel's throne forever. God's people were obliged to obey their earthly king because he was the Lord's anointed. Their obedience to him brought glory and honor to God.

As those who have bowed to allegiance of King Jesus, we honor Him submitting to those authorities He has placed.

Romans 13:1-2—“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. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”

The followers of Jesus Christ ought to be model citizens who obey the law and submit to authority. This is wisdom.

Some translations render verse 2 this way:

“Keep the king’s commandment for the sake of your oath to God.”

In other words, the transformation that God’s wisdom brings about in my life impacts my relationship to authority. There’s not a person in this room who is not affected by someone in authority. Whether it’s in your home or at school, where you work and where you go to church, you have a relationship to the authority that God has placed in your life. If we’re employees, we submit to bosses that we may not always respect. If we’re students, we submit to professors that we may not always agree with.

What do you do when someone in authority makes a decision or does something that you don’t like? The Preacher says that wisdom demonstrates humility that knows when to submit and obey, even in circumstances where you lack understanding.

3. ACCEPTING what you can’t change (8:8-14)

“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. 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. 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. Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. 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. 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.”

The wisdom that makes the face shine is the kind that of wisdom that trusts what you can't see and obeys what you can't understand. And rather than seeking to always be in control, it also accepts what you can't change.

All of us know what it's like to want to be in control. If we all were honest, deep down we are all control freaks. The desire to be in control often manifests itself through worry. Show me a chronic worry wart, and I'll you someone who wants to be in control of a situation. Wisdom recognizes that there are circumstances and realities in life that are beyond our control.

Notice that Solomon mentions several categories of life's realities that you and I simply can't control.

Death (v. 8a)

“No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death.”

The Preacher says that the day of your death is something that is out of your hands. Worry about it all you want to, but you have no control over it. Neither

can you control the day of death for someone that you love. It is a universal reality that stares all of us in the face.

Solomon's point is that no human being has power over life and death. One of these days, we will all take one final breath and step into eternity. When that day comes, there will be absolutely nothing we can do to extend it.

Hebrews 9:27—“It is appointed...”

Remember what Solomon has already said in chapter 7 about the day of death being better for the day of birth, which is only true for those who live with gospel wisdom.

Because of our faith in Christ, we believers view death very differently than the rest of the world around us does.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14—“But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.”

Only those who know the Lord Jesus Christ in a personal and intimate way can make such a statement in the face of death. Believers have hope in a better resurrection!

Affliction (v. 8b-9)

“There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. 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.”

The Preacher says that everyone under the sun gets hurt. Godly wisdom recognizes that in a fallen world everyone is broken and that into every life some rain must fall. And it is impossible to live in a fallen world filled with broken

people without some of them stepping on our toes. Jesus said that in the world we are all going to face trouble. It is not a matter of 'if,' but a matter of 'when.'

Some of the trouble and affliction we face is brought on by choices that we've made as we face painful consequences. Some affliction comes from the hands of other people. We have no choice in the matter. We are painfully impacted by the decisions of someone else.

Some of you have recently found yourself thrust into a situation over which you have no control. Perhaps it was:

- the unfaithfulness of a spouse
- the spitefulness of a coworker
- the carelessness of a parent
- the rebelliousness of a child

If there is something you can do to make a situation right, then do it. But if it is something beyond your control, accept it for what it is and entrust it to God.

1 Peter 5:7—“...casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.”

Some of you have experienced the affliction of a rebellious teenager. Ruth Graham, wife of the famous evangelist Billy Graham, wrote a book for worried parents who live with the pain of a prodigal child. The book is called, “Prodigals and Those Who Love Them.” She says:

“We parents must take care of the possible and trust God for the impossible. We are to love, affirm, encourage, teach, listen to and care for the physical needs of the family. We cannot convict of sin, create hunger and thirst after God, or convert. These are miracles, and miracles are not in our department.”

What she says there is a good rule for life that wisdom is able to recognize. It is what Solomon is saying here. We must trust God with what we cannot control.

Unrighteousness (v. 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.”

The Preacher now takes us to the scene of a funeral. It involved a man who had died, someone who was wicked, but also went in and out of the temple as a religious hypocrite. He received the praises of others, but he had rejected God’s wisdom and had not lived a godly life. Yet his funeral was extravagant, and he was given an eloquent eulogy while those who were truly godly were ignored and forgotten.

I heard about two brothers who lived in a small town, and over the course of many years, cheated, swindled, and stole from everyone that they ever did business with. The entire town despised these two brothers as everyone was aware of just how dishonest they truly were. One day, one of the brothers suddenly died. Although they had never attended church, the one remaining brother went to the local pastor and offered a large sum of money if he would come to the funeral, say a few words, and during the course of the eulogy refer to his brother as “a saint.”

The preacher was troubled by the request, however, it was a very poor church and the church desperately needed repairs. The town had heard about the pastor’s dilemma and were curious as to what he would do. The funeral began, the church was packed, and the preacher started. As he began to wrap it up, he paused and turned to face the remaining brother.

He said, “As you all know, the departed was an awful individual who robbed, cheated, swindled and stole from everyone he ever did business with. However, compared to his brother here, he was a saint!”

Solomon is vexed by seeing unrighteousness praised! It bothered him and he referred to it as ‘vanity.’

David Jeremiah—“...we see the same phenomenon. TV shows us a godless celebrity whose death is mourned by the entire world. A successful millionaire is ushered to his grave with great fanfare. But the simple, humble, godly man or woman isn’t even afforded an inch on the obituary page.”

The celebration of unrighteousness is something that could eat you alive if you let it. Instead, wisdom gives it to God.

Delay (v. 11-13)

“Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. 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.”

The Preacher points out the fact that delayed justice makes the wicked more bent on continuing to do evil. Because he doesn't see God raining down lightning bolts on the one who defies Him, he thinks God is asleep at the helm.

Notice the contrast between the one who fears God and the one who doesn't. Those who are wise live in the fear of God, and Solomon says that it will be ‘well’ with them. They are saved from judgment. But the one who spurns God’s mercy and despises His Word is only one breath away from it. The reason that it seems that judgment is being delayed is because God is so very patient.

Romans 2:2-4—“We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man...that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”

Wisdom trusts God to do what is right in His own time!

Injustice (v. 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.”

The Preacher says that life under the sun is full of unfair and unjust reversals. We expect the righteous to be rewarded and the wicked to be punished, but so often it seems that the opposite happens. Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people.

Philip Ryken—*“The man who robs investors of their inheritance gets a huge bonus, while hardworking people lose their jobs and their homes. Suffering pastors are put in prison, while the persecutors of the church grow strong in their cruel power. To bring things down to a personal level, the student who cheated on a difficult exam gets an A, but all you get is a C-. The worker who stabbed you in the back gets the promotion, while you remain stuck at the same pay grade. Or you make a commitment to purity, and although you are still single, the girl who throws herself at men gets a ring on her finger and a long white dress.”*

Without the wisdom of God in your life, this sort of thing can send you over the edge. We must trust His Word and be confident in His promise that one day the righteous will be vindicated, while the sinner will be judged.

4. ENJOYING what you can't earn (8:15-17)

“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. 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.”

God's wisdom changes your life and makes your face shine because it involves trusting what you can't see, obeying what you can't understand, and accepting what you can't change. It results in enjoying what you can't earn.

In the closing verses of the chapter, the Preacher says that when we look around at life under the sun, there is much that we don't understand. There are things that we can't explain. Wisdom, however, lives with joyful hope. Joy comes through the recognition that God is good, that God is gracious, and that God is governing all the affairs of life even when it doesn't seem that way.

Ultimately, wisdom rests in the grace of God. Solomon says that a man is powerless to save himself and to find out the work of God on his own. It is a reminder that instead of wisdom coming to the man who works hard for it, wisdom has come to man as a gift in the person of Jesus!

In order to deal with the everyday matters of life and death, we need the wisdom of the gospel, don't we? Whether it is living under the authority of another, or facing an uncertain future, painful circumstances, or the ability to interpret the things that happen in life. We don't have all the answers, but our faces can radiate the wisdom of God in Christ.

illus. of Stephen in Acts 6:13

Jesus is the wisdom of God, my friend. If you truly want to know the wise way to live, you must come to Him in faith. Confess your sins, repent, and believe that Christ died for you and rose again! Let Him make you wise.

“Father, thank You for making us wise in Jesus Christ. He is our wisdom. As we navigate the challenges of life, may our faces beam with the glory of Christ that has been shone into our hearts. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”