

Week 11 - Facing Frustration - Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

Scripture Reading: Philippians 4:4-9

Introduction

Last week, in the latter half of Chapter 7, we saw how Qoheleth shows us wisdom at work and how wisdom gives us balance, strength, and insight.

He's also said several times how it's better to be wise than foolish, so clearly, he comes down on the side of wisdom.

But he's also pointed out how wisdom is limited in its usefulness because it can't solve all our problems.

That's primarily because our knowledge and wisdom are limited, and we simply don't know all we need to know to navigate all the issues facing us.

That can lead to frustration, and frustration is the theme of Chapter 8.

Frustration is the emotional response to being prevented from achieving or attaining something we believe we should be able to.

When we're frustrated, it's often because there's something in our way that we can't change.

Simply put, we don't like being at the mercy of forces that are beyond our control.

When Kathy and I lived in Burlington, we were often frustrated by trains.

You see, Burlington is divided by train tracks, and you have to cross them to get from one side of town to the other.

I know it was just a perception, but it seemed as if the trains only ran when you were in a hurry.

Perhaps your frustration is **technology** that doesn't work the way you think it should, or **long lines**, maybe you're living with **chronic pain**, or maybe you struggle with some other major or minor annoyance.

But I'm sure each of us has something that frustrates us on a regular basis.

That's life under the sun.

Chapter 8 begins commonly enough as verse 1 transitions between Chapter 7 and what is to come.

Qoheleth begins by asking a couple of rhetorical questions [**Ecclesiastes 8:1a**],

Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

Some scholars interpret his questions more negatively than I think Qoheleth means them to be and deduce that he expects the answer of "No one."

But given the positive nature of the second half of the verse, that seems unlikely.

I believe he is instead saying that wisdom is a rare trait to be highly prized for the insights it gives.

After all, he has already stated in 7:28 that he has only found that 1/10 of one percent of all men he has encountered have possessed wisdom - one in a thousand.

Think about how hard it can be to understand some of the teachings we find in the Bible.

Those attending our Adult Ed class have experienced that difficulty while studying doctrine.

And I suspect we all sometimes struggle with understanding God's providence and activity in the world.

Is my suffering a result of sin and a sign of God's judgment meant to bring me to repentance, or is it an opportunity to grow my faith as I rely on God's grace to see me through it, or is God teaching me a lesson I can learn no other way?

It can be difficult to tell, and the wise man who can see the path to solving such issues is rare indeed.

One of my true joys is encountering someone who can decipher complex matters and explain them clearly.

The prophet Daniel was such a person.

Daniel 1:20 tells us he was ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in Babylon regarding matters of wisdom and understanding.

He is also a great example of the last half of verse 1 [**Ecclesiastes 8:1b**], which says:

A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.

We read in **Daniel 1:15** how the Babylonians could see that Daniel and his friends were better in appearance than the Babylonian youth.

It's interesting to note how godly wisdom can improve the way we look.

Inner wisdom imparts an outer glow and a softness of features.

Next, having begun on a somewhat positive note of review and introduction to the remainder of Chapter 8, Qoheleth proceeds to mention five frustrations that are common to life under the sun and how to deal with them.

I. Frustration with authority (2-7)

In verses 2-7, he begins with our frustration with authority. He writes [**Ecclesiastes 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 the 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?

Let's begin by considering the power of the king.

Basically, what the king says goes.

Qoheleth says, "he does whatever he pleases," and his word is "supreme" and beyond questioning.

In other words, the king's authority is absolute, and although Qoheleth doesn't say it directly, he has the power to punish, as we see in **Romans 13:3-4**.

Qoheleth alludes to it in verse 5, where we see that the one who obeys the king will be spared.

So, clearly, there is a practical reason to obey a king.

Of course, we aren't under the authority of a king today, but this passage still applies because it's appropriate to extend the principle here to all authorities we find over us.

And that's because of the second and more important reason - the theological reason that God has placed those authorities over us.

We read that in **Romans 13:1-2** where the apostle Paul writes:

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.

Qoheleth says much the same thing as he says, "Keep the king's command because of God's oath to him."

Admittedly, our authorities haven't received the same "anointing" as the kings of the Old Testament.

But they have received God's "appointing," and we honor God as we honor them.

Conversely, as we resist them, Paul makes clear we are resisting God.

This is a difficult command because our authorities aren't always easy to submit to.

That's why I pray each Sunday for God to help us submit to the authorities he has put in place.

Still, whenever this subject comes up, people wonder if the command to obey is absolute or has limits.

The best answer I can give is the one Peter gave in Acts 5:29 when the religious authorities commanded him and the other disciples not to preach in Jesus' name:

"We must obey God rather than men."

When a matter creates a conflict between God and man, our obedience must be to the higher authority.

Qoheleth gives guidance in that as well when he says not to be hasty to walk away from any authority God has put in place.

We will not always be under godly authorities - more often than not, we won't be - and we may have to resist, but we should never do so quickly or lightly.

Again, Daniel provides us with a godly example of resisting authority in a submissive, humble manner.

He and his friends were not conformists who did whatever they were told, but neither were they revolutionaries brazenly flaunting their disobedience.

And, when it came down to it, they submitted to the punishment their disobedience wrought.

The wise person will discern when it's right to submit and resist.

There is a time for each, and each has its burden because knowledge and wisdom are limited, and we don't know the end of things.

Therefore, it's hard to know what time it is, making it doubly hard to understand the wise course to take.

The thought of our lack of understanding again led Qoheleth to a subject that also causes a great deal of frustration: the inevitability of death.

II. Frustration with the inevitable

Look with me at verses 8-9 [**Ecclesiastes 8:8-9**] where he writes:

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.

Hebrews 9:27 tells us that we each have an appointment with death - the problem is, we don't know when.

God knows with absolute precision, and it's on his calendar.

Psalms 139:16 tells us that he determined the length of our lives before we were born.

That means no human has the power of life and death - even though it sometimes seems we do.

Think of what that means.

It means we're immortal until God's prearranged time, and no one's life is ever cut short.

Whether long or short, everyone gets the time on earth that God allotted them.

But it also means no one can extend their time even an instant.

While teaching against being anxious, Jesus asked in **Matthew 6:27**, "Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?" and the answer is "none of you."

Then, he brings the two themes together as he considers the soldier at war.

One of the more demanding things governmental authority can do is send someone to war, and few people have less control than a soldier.

No one's situation is much different because everyone is under someone's authority.

We all face an uncertain future, and we don't even know enough to correctly and fully interpret the things that happen in our lives.

None of us controls our own destiny, and we can't even control the length of our lives.

It's maddeningly frustrating.

But at least it's the same for everyone, right?

Not hardly, as Qoheleth points out next.

III. Frustration with justice (10-15)

Let's look at verses 10-15, where we see Qoheleth's next frustration under the sun [**Ecclesiastes 8:10-15**] - justice:

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. 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.

If God is just, we reason; he ought to judge the wicked and reward the faithful - that just makes sense.

Yet we see the same thing Qoheleth saw, and it frustrates us.

By all appearances, bad people seem to be doing just fine.

Asaph saw the same thing and struggled with the apparent contradiction.

Look at what he writes about the wicked in **Psalm 73:4-5** –

They have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.

He continues in verse 13 [**Psalm 73:13-14**] –

All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.

In other words, God's enemies seem to get all the goods - they earn more, have more power, and experience more pleasure than those who try to honor and please God.

And Qoheleth says it's even worse than that because those doing wrong are being praised in the very place where they should be called out for their wickedness.

Perhaps he's thinking of their eulogies, given that he speaks of them being buried.

If so, it seems even worse somehow because they aren't even alive to continue to hold sway over anyone.

Yet they're still being praised and honored, meaning that people's admiration for them was genuine.

I'm reminded of the story of the man whose brother had died, and he offered the minister a \$1,000 donation to the church if he would say that his brother was a saint during his funeral.

The brother was a known rogue and all-around scoundrel, yet the offer of \$1,000 was quite tempting.

So, on the day of the funeral, the minister stood up and said, "The deceased was no good. He was a vile, evil man, and everyone knows it. But, compared to his brother sitting in the front row here, he was a saint."

Isaiah pronounced woe [**Isaiah 5:2**] upon those who call evil good and good evil, yet we see it all the time.

Qoheleth saw it, too, and it frustrated him just as it frustrates us.

One reason Qoheleth saw for such depravity was the delay of justice [**Ecclesiastes 8:11**].

Peter writes in **2 Peter 3:9** that the Lord isn't slow in punishing the wicked and rewarding the righteous.

Rather, he's patient and merciful.

But our hearts are so depraved that we take advantage of God's mercy and longsuffering, reasoning that since there have been no consequences so far, there will never be any.

We see this played out all around us today as our criminal justice system in many places has no teeth.

Once people realize they aren't being punished, there is no incentive to reform, and crime escalates in both frequency and severity.

Absent consequences, there's little reason for reform.

And that line of thinking continues to its ultimate conclusion that there is also nothing to fear when this life is over.

Looking to 2 Peter again [**2 Peter 3:4**], we read how people will begin to believe that Christ is not returning to judge.

Professor of Biological Sciences at Cornell University, William B. Provine, was the poster boy for that kind of thinking.

He said the following in a 1994 debate:

"When you die, you are not going to be surprised because you are going to be completely dead. Now, if I find myself aware after I'm dead, I'm going to be really surprised! But at least I'm going to hell, where I won't have all those grinning preachers from Sunday morning listening."

Professor Provine was ushered into eternity on September 1, 2015, at the age of 73.

He got the surprise he didn't think was coming, and if he didn't have a complete change of heart before he died, he got the hell he mocked as well.

Looking only at life under the sun, he came to the logical conclusion that there is nothing else.

And what other conclusion *is* logical when one leaves God out of the equation?

Yet, despite evidence to the contrary, Qoheleth declares that justice will ultimately occur.

In verses 12-13, he declares that everyone will get what's coming to them even though the opposite is occurring now.

We aren't told the basis of Qoheleth's assurance, however.

We only see that he reckons the ledger will be brought into balance one day.

But for now, Qoheleth declares that what is taking place on the earth, where things are topsy-turvy, is vanity.

Still, in spite of all that, we can enjoy our time under the sun when we recognize God's place in our lives.

God has given us this life; he orders our days, and there is joy to be had while we await his justice.

Yes, there is vanity under the sun.

Yes, there is injustice, and it frustrates us to see wickedness unpunished and righteousness unrewarded.

But our life is much more than trouble and hard work and a path out of the frustration of life under the sun.

There is joy and refreshment to be found in God's goodness and reason to celebrate because we know we aren't home yet, and God's justice will prevail in the end.

But, as we saw in 3:11 [**Ecclesiastes 3:11**], God has put eternity in our hearts, and we can't help but yearn for more.

And we are often frustrated by our limitations while we sojourn here.

IV. Frustration with our limits

In verses 16-17 [**Ecclesiastes 8:16-17**], Qoheleth expresses his final frustration in this chapter as he says the riddle remains no matter how much effort he applies to solving it:

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.

I've noticed that there seems to be an ever-increasing lack of wonder in the world today.

No longer do we seem to be asking the big questions.

Instead, we've predominantly become a sound-bite society whose philosophy can be printed on a bumper sticker.

But Qoheleth never stopped seeking even though the answer to his question about the meaning of life continued to elude him.

It seems the more he learned, the more he realized he still didn't know.

After working on it for eight years, Samuel Johnson completed his Dictionary of the English Language in 1755.

At the time, the dictionary was widely acclaimed as "one of the greatest single achievements of scholarship."

Dr. Johnson had amassed a definition for virtually every English word, yet his efforts only served to reveal how little he actually knew.

He said that one inquiry had only led to another, that each book pointed to another, and that searching didn't mean finding, so pursuing perfection was like chasing the sun.

I think Qoheleth would have understood Dr. Johnson's frustration.

As we reach the end of the first 2/3 of the book of Ecclesiastes, we see Qoheleth still struggling with many of the same questions he began with.

Qoheleth writes about how his quest has led to sleepless nights and days filled with inquiry, all to no avail.

He can see God's work but can't understand it because human wisdom alone is insufficient for grasping God's ways.

In this, Qoheleth speaks for everyone who asks the big questions because the workings behind God's governance of the universe are simply beyond our capacity to discern.

That frustrates us because we want to know; we long to see it all.

Conclusion

But the fact that we ask the big questions is evidence that this world isn't all there is.

Remember, 3:11 tells us that God put eternity in our hearts.

In other words, the longing we experience is God-given, and the frustration it causes points us to him.

The fact that we're dissatisfied with this world and the limited knowledge it affords is evidence that we were created for something more.

Some people allow their frustration to morph into anger and resentment toward God.

But the better choice by far is to recognize our limitations while praising God for his boundless knowledge and wisdom.

Paul expressed that very thing in **Romans 11:33-36** where he wrote:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

We may not have all the answers, but we know who does, and it pays to remember that faith is unnecessary when there is no deficiency.

Like the apostle Paul, we can say [**2 Timothy 1:12b**],

I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me.

I encourage you to embrace your limitations and let your frustrations keep you reaching, not merely for the answers, but for the One who has the answers.

As Abraham Lincoln's pastor, Dr. Phineas Gurley, said when he presided over Lincoln's funeral at the White House:

Where reason fails, with all her powers, there faith prevails, and love adores.

Let's pray.