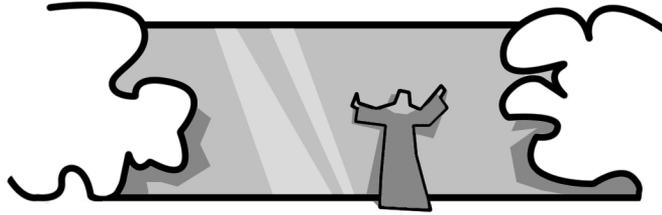


Seeing Through a Glass Darkly



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ecclesiastes 8.*

Memory Text: “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*).

In Ecclesiastes 8 Solomon continues exploring many of the themes he touched on earlier. Again, it would be easy to get caught up in all the pessimism and complaints. But then again, life “under the sun” is something easy to be pessimistic about, is it not?

Nevertheless, as in most of these chapters, powerful gems of deep spiritual truth can be found amid all the more difficult rhetoric. No doubt that's another reason God had this book included in the Bible.

Look, for instance, at the memory text. What a promise, what a hope, is contained in there, a hope that must extend to something beyond this life. Indeed, amid all the negativity, Solomon shows a keen understanding of final justice and judgment, that regardless of how bad things on earth are now—as we are in the midst of the great controversy (*Rev. 12:12*)—God's final justice will be executed. That's one thing we can be certain of, even if we just have to wait. Maybe that's why the saints are said to, among other things, have “patience” (*Rev. 13:10, 14:12*).

This week we continue to explore more of the foibles, fears, and hopes of fallen humanity, all given from the unique perspective of King Solomon.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 3.*

Keep the King's Commandment!

As Christians we constantly are faced with the tension that comes from living in this world while accepting the reality that we already belong to another kingdom. Augustine called it the distinction between the City of God and the city of man.

Read Hebrews 11:13-16. How do these verses reveal the reality of the two lands between which we are pulled back and forth?

One source of potential tension Christians face deals, of course, with how we relate to the government under which we live. We all live under a government that holds the reins of power, that makes and enforces the rules and laws of our particular country. The Bible, time and again, makes it plain that Christians are to follow the laws; that is, they are to be good citizens.

Read Ecclesiastes 8:1-5. What is Solomon saying here? How do his words here fit with these texts: *Rom. 13:1-4, Titus 3:1, 1 Pet. 2:13-17*?

It's not all that surprising that Solomon would be saying this; after all, he is the king. However, the words do bring out an important principle of Christian citizenship. Regardless of where we live, we are obligated to obey the law of the land, even if there are laws we might not, personally, like. Notice the use of the word *personally*. There's a world of difference between obeying laws we might not *personally* like and obeying laws that are in violation of God's commandments, laws that directly contradict the basic principles of how God has told us we should live (see tomorrow's lesson). The crucial point, however, is that as people called to a standard of morality higher than the world's, we should be seeking to "keep the king's commandment."

What would happen were everyone simply to decide that they would obey only laws that they, personally, like? Why is this not a valid option? Why should we, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, be particularly sensitive to the importance of law?

I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .

▶ **Key Text:** *Ecclesiastes 8:12*

▶ **Teach the Class to:**

Know: The best way to live a godly life is with humility.

Feel: Beyond the mysteries of life exists a loving God who wants us to know Him.

Do: Live with certainty that we are fulfilling God's will.

▶ **Lesson Outline:**

I. Our Place in the Eternal Scheme of Things (*Eccles. 8:1-8*)

A How does honoring earthly authorities reflect our obedience to God? Read Romans 13:1-4 and 1 Peter 2:13-17. What's the hardest part about obeying these imperatives? How would it be different if we lived in another part of the world?

B So much of what happens to us is out of our control. List three biblical characters who served God in conditions that were less than ideal. List three contemporaries you admire for doing the same thing. How is your life similar or dissimilar to theirs?

II. The Better Way (*Eccles. 8:9-13*)

A In spite of the inequities readily apparent in our society, why do Christians insist on living to a higher standard? What are the results to us as individuals and as a society?

B In verses 12 and 13 Solomon suggests that living righteously is its own reward; that the wicked will eventually get what they deserve. In what ways have you seen this played out in your life?

▶ **Summary:** The Bible sometimes describes God as a rock, both stable and unmovable. We certainly need Him in order to stay anchored in a troubled world.

Keep the King's Commandment?

Keep the king's commandment? Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (*Daniel 3*) or like Daniel (*Daniel 6*)?

As we said yesterday, it's not always easy living in one land while your heart, ideally, is in another (*Matt. 6:20, 21*). What's a good Christian citizen to do?

What other examples can you think of from the Bible in which God's people were forced to disobey those in political power?

The Bible is filled with examples of people who have faced persecution, threats, jail, and death as a result of being in conflict with earthly rulers. What makes this even more complicated is that many of these earthly rulers were leaders of God's chosen nation.

Meanwhile, as students of the book of Revelation, we know, too, that right at the end of time God's people are going to have to disobey the laws of earthly leaders in order to be faithful to God (*Rev. 13:12-16; 14*). Thus, we see that we are to obey the king's commandment, just as long as it doesn't conflict with the King's commandment (*John 19:19*).

Such actions, though, are very serious matters and shouldn't be undertaken lightly. One, instead, should move only after counsel with others who are wise in the ways of the Lord and, of course, only after seeking the guidance of the Lord, who speaks to us through His Word.

"The laws of the land at all levels may at times conflict with some of God's commandments. While magistrates bear responsibility for the law, each citizen is accountable to God for the choices he or she makes. In such cases Christians will explain their convictions and appeal to freedom of conscience, which is a God-given right on the basis of creation in His image. If the appeals are rejected, faithfulness to God first may result in fines, persecution, prison sentences, or other sacrifices that Christians in centuries past had to make."—*Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, vol. 12, p. 701.

If you knew someone about to challenge the legal authorities over an issue regarding what that person believed was a biblical imperative, what advice and counsel would you give? What principles would you look for to help guide this person in doing the right thing?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

Just for Teachers: Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners' experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: **Why is this lesson important to me?**

Invite the class members to share their week with each other. Quietly note if they are sharing good things in their lives, or worries. (Refer to your list during the Practice-Application section.)

Think of some public figures that are familiar to all: entertainers, politicians, and/or local celebrities. Share with each other what you know about these people. How much is positive? What do we know about the negative? Discuss how the situations of these people compare to what we know of Solomon and his life. What conclusions can you draw?

► **STEP 2—Explore!**

Just for Teachers: This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question: **What do I need to know from God's Word?**

Bible Commentary

Solomon appears very pessimistic about the purpose of human life. If we read Ecclesiastes at face value, we could feel a sense of hopelessness about daily life. However, after taking a closer look at the concepts that Solomon is really struggling with, we are left with a sense of hope and joy in what our future holds.

(Review Ecclesiastes 8 with your class.)

I. Loyalty to Earthly and Heavenly Rulers (*Eccles. 8:1-4*)

Reflecting on his life, Solomon draws some conclusions. Look at the language he uses and how we understand these words today.

Ecclesiastes 8:1

“Brightens” (*NIV*) or “face to shine” implies serenity in a person’s character and disposition. See *Numbers 6:25*.

C O N T I N U E D 

Trust Amid Uncertainty

Solomon then shifts to another train of thought. If you read the last part of verse 5 (“and a wise man’s heart discerneth both time and judgment”) and then go through to verse 9, you will see that (however difficult the texts) he’s talking about the uncertainties of life, that there are things that happen that we just don’t understand. No matter how wise a person is or however much his or her heart can discern “time and judgment,” there are things we just can’t make sense of, things that even the wisest among us can’t fathom.

The good news, however, is that as Christians we can trust God even when things unfold that make no sense. This trust, though, doesn’t happen automatically; we just don’t wake up after a life of faithlessness and suddenly start trusting God. Instead, we learn to trust God by reading His Word, claiming His promises, and living by faith and obedience. If we do these things with a will surrendered to Him, we will learn to trust Him no matter what we face.

Below are texts that deal with faith and trust in God. After each text, write down what it means to you personally, how you have experienced the reality of the promise. Also, if there are some texts we’ve missed that have been special to you, write them down and what they have meant. Bring your answers to class on Sabbath.

Ps. 118:8, 9

Ps. 34:8

Prov. 3:5, 6

Isa. 12:2

Rom. 8:28

James 2:22

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

“Changes” (*NIV*) is seeing the difference the grace of God has in transforming the heart or character.

“Boldness” or a “hard appearance” is the face of those who lack gentleness and culture.

Ecclesiastes 8:2

Solomon considers a “king” as someone God has anointed.

Consider This: Who might be an “Anointed one” today?

“Took an oath” (*NIV*) shows a promise to obey the king whom God appointed. *See 1 Chronicles 29:24 (officers and David’s sons pledged to serve Solomon).*

Ecclesiastes 8:3

“Hurry away” (*NIV*) does not mean running off on an errand but rather withdrawing allegiance to the king, to forsake serving him.

Ecclesiastes 8:4

Solomon cautions that we should not “stand up for a bad cause” (*NIV*). In other words, servants may be right in what they are thinking, but they shouldn’t contradict the king. The king is supreme and always right.

II. Justice (*Eccles. 8:5-8*)*Ecclesiastes 8:5*

“No evil thing” means not knowing or experiencing any evil things.

“Time and judgment” refer to the fact that a wise man’s mind knows when it is right to speak and when to remain silent.

Ecclesiastes 8:6

“Misery” is evil or trouble. When making plans, plan carefully to avoid problems.

Ecclesiastes 8:7

One thing that troubles people is their unknown future.

Ecclesiastes 8:8

“Retain the spirit” means that life can end at any moment. None of us avoids death. *See Job 21:17, 18.*

CONTINUED 

Trust and Justice

Read Ecclesiastes 8:11-13. What point is Solomon making?

vs. 11

vs. 12

vs. 13

Solomon is, again, dealing with the painful question of injustice in this life (*see also vs. 14*). He notices that, indeed, the wicked often seem to get away with their deeds, with no immediate punishment. Though at times we do see the wicked suffering from the wages of their deeds, they don't always. That it happens sometimes is fine, but that it doesn't always happen leads to the question of Why not? Why is there no justice here?

Solomon doesn't have the answer; what he does have, however, is a powerful admonition: Don't worry about the evildoer; just be faithful to God, and He will reward you.

In a certain sense here, Solomon is calling us to live a life of faith, of trust. Sure, there is injustice; we all know that. And, certainly, God does. The Lord, though, hasn't given us here an explanation about all these things. Instead, He has called us to live a life of faith and obedience, trusting on the merits of Jesus Christ as our hope of salvation. These are the truths He has revealed to us now (*John 14:9; Gal. 3:21, 22; Heb. 1:1, 2; 1 John 5:3*), not the reasons for so many bad things that happen "under the sun."

The point of today, as with yesterday's lesson, should be that we need to trust not in what we can see or understand but in the promises of God, who has revealed Himself and His love to us through Jesus, especially Jesus crucified.

Are you troubled by the injustice you see in this world? Think about the injustice of the Cross, the greatest injustice ever. How should this great truth of Christ as the victim of injustice, all for our salvation, help you trust in the goodness of God despite all the injustice around you?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: What do Revelation 13:10 and 14:12 tell us about justice?

III. Punishment and Reward (*Eccles. 8:9-13*)

Ecclesiastes 8:9

Talking about what he “saw” (*NIV*), Solomon is referring to his personal experiences and observations.

Ecclesiastes 8:10

The phrase “wicked buried” implies that the wicked are buried with honors, as if they were righteous. (*See Job 21:28-33 and Luke 16:22.*)

To “go from the holy place and receive praise” (*NIV*) means that evil human beings, or the unconverted, conform to the outward requirements of church membership. These individuals are then treated as if they were godly. Solomon asks why God allows this. (*See also Ecclesiastes 1:11.*)

Consider This: Why does this practice bother Solomon? How should we respond when we witness something like this? (*See Ecclesiastes 8:11-13.*)

► STEP 3—Practice!

Just for Teachers: This step of the learning cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**

Thought Questions:

- 1 What did it mean to make an oath? (*Read Ezek. 17:13-19.*) Compare Romans 13:5 with our understanding of obedience today.
- 2 Can others see the “changes” that the grace of God has made in your heart? How do you reflect Christ’s character to your family? Co-workers? Strangers?

Application Questions:

- 1 (Refer back to your list from section 1.) When we share our daily life with others, do we share our joys or concerns? Why do you think we choose to share these parts of our lives?

CONTINUED 

The Business That Is Done on Earth

Read Ecclesiastes 8:16, 17. What point is Solomon making? How does this fit in with what came before in the chapter? Why is this point so important?

In the past years there has been an explosion of knowledge. We know more about our world than ever before. Every day new discoveries are made in all areas, especially in science. And yet, the more we learn, the more we realize our ignorance. The “simplest” things turn out to be so full of mysteries that we can’t begin to explain. No matter what level we get at, there’s always something underneath it, something out of our reach. The work and power of God in nature alone is something that we only barely grasp. And, of course, the greatest of all God’s work, the plan of salvation, is itself deemed a “mystery” (*1 Cor. 2:7, Eph. 3:9, Col. 2:2*).

Perhaps one of the best insights into how we are to deal with things we don’t understand comes from the book of Job. Though terrible calamities befell Job, when God appears to Job at the end of the book, He doesn’t give Job any explanation for the events that ruined his life.

Skim over Job 38–42. What is the essence of God’s reply to Job regarding the trials that Job faced?

You probably noticed that the Lord said nothing about Satan’s taunt (*Job 1:9*) or about God’s reply to Satan (*Job 2:6*); indeed, He gave no explanation for anything that happened to Job. Instead, the Lord unleashed a flow of rhetorical questions about His own might and creative power in contrast to Job’s transience and weakness. For Job, that vision of God was enough to convince him that his bemoaning about his dead children, ruined health, and destroyed property was all simply him uttering “things too wonderful for me, which I knew not” (*Job 42:3*).

Job, with his glimpse of God as Creator, was silenced; what about us, we who have a view of God not only as Creator but as Redeemer? How should the revelation of God at the Cross teach us that we can trust the Lord even in the worst situations?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

- 2 How do we live each day with a sense of hope? (*Jer. 31:25*).

► **STEP 4—Apply!**

Just for Teachers: In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question: With God's help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?

It is hard to understand how Solomon, with a life of joy, riches, and abundance, can write so negatively.

Review John 10:10. Jesus came to this earth so we might have an abundant life. We can choose to claim this promise every day.

Consider This: Ask class members to share what they do when they begin to take a negative view of the world. What suggestions can they share to help others look at life in a “brighter light”? Refer to *Proverbs 17:22*.

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 203–205; *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 602, 603; *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 699; vol. 6, p. 203.

“We are to recognize human government as an ordinance of divine appointment, and teach obedience to it as a sacred duty, within its legitimate sphere. But when its claims conflict with the claims of God, we must obey God rather than men. God’s Word must be recognized as above all human legislation. A ‘Thus saith the Lord’ is not to be set aside for a ‘Thus saith the church’ or a ‘Thus saith the state.’ The crown of Christ is to be lifted above the diadems of earthly potentates.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 68.

“No finite mind can fully comprehend the character or the works of the Infinite One. We cannot by searching find out God. To minds the strongest and most highly cultured, as well as to the weakest and most ignorant, that holy Being must remain clothed in mystery. But though ‘clouds and darkness are round about him: righteousness and judgment are the foundation of his throne.’ Psalm 97:2, R.V. We can so far comprehend His dealing with us as to discern boundless mercy united to infinite power. We can understand as much of His purposes as we are capable of comprehending; beyond this we may still trust the hand that is omnipotent, the heart that is full of love.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 169.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 “There is, it seems to us,
At best, only a limited value
In the knowledge derived from experience.”
—T. S. Eliot, “East Coker”

Look at this quote from T. S. Eliot. Think of it in the context of the last two verses of Ecclesiastes 8, about the futility of trying to find out the ways of God by seeking them or by laboring. What does this tell us about the limits of what we can learn about God, apart from the truths He has revealed to us through divine inspiration?

- 2 As a class, go over your responses to Tuesday’s lesson. What can you learn from one another’s answers?