

**Wisdom for Powerless Times**  
**Eccl. 8:2-9:12**

**Introduction:** There used to be a game show on TV called “the 10,000 pyramid”. The object of the game was to give a person a set of items and for him to access their connection so as to name or categorize them. It seems to me that Ecclesiastes is something like a spiritual version of the 10,000 pyramid. Solomon gives a series of observations and proverbs and we are often left to determine the answer to the question, “What is the category?”

In this section, as Solomon observes life under the sun, he sees many things that trouble him and that make life vain. All of them, in one way or another, belong to the category of powerlessness. He sees how all of us are at times powerless, subject to forces over which we have no control. But out of this pessimistic condition, Solomon can see a ray of hope for the believer in God and can offer wise advice about powerless times in our lives.

**Man’s helplessness or powerlessness is evident in four ways. We are:**

**Powerless in the face of authority (v. 2-9)**

*Perhaps the theme of this section is best derived from the observation of v. 8. No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge in the time of war, and evil will not deliver those who practice it. (Ecclesiastes 8:8)*

*The point is that man is often powerless in the face of his circumstances. A case in point is the powerlessness of being under a king who exercises his authority oppressively.*

*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. (Ecclesiastes 8:9)*

**In ancient Israel the person of ultimate governmental power was the king. Though kings in Israelite society were supposed to enforce obedience to the Law of God—to reward the righteous and punish the wicked, they often did the opposite. A capricious king could with a word even take the life of one of his subjects. Talk about powerlessness!**

**Solomon urges his reader to recognize the power of the king and avoid inflaming his displeasure or wrath.**

*I say, “Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God. “Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases.” Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, “What are you doing?” He who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure. (Ecclesiastes 8:2-5)*

The underlying message of this section is that we should respect those with power over us. In the context of Israelite society, Solomon urges those under a king to be loyal to their pledges of fidelity, be

considerate of the privileges of his association, be cautious in questioning his judgments, and obedient to his decrees. And if he is oppressive be aware of the use that even God may make of Him for His providential purposes!

### **Powerless in the face of life's injustices**

***The section builds on the idea presenting in the first section. Just as one is powerless in the face of a capricious king, so he may also be powerless in the face of life's inequities. Life is not always fair! Solomon gives an example:***

*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. (Ecclesiastes 8:10)*

Here Solomon describes hypocrites who did evil and yet were commonly in the temple pretending to be holy. They are buried with honor and their evil is forgotten (Or an amended reading says, "they are praised" in spite of their evil deeds. Vanity indeed!) That's just not right; but it's the way life sometimes is! And who among could not cite similar examples.

Moreover, the practice of evil is often encouraged by the very people whose job it is to restrain it!

*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. (Ecclesiastes 8:11)*

And we may even say that life under the rule of God Himself is not always fair.

*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. (Ecclesiastes 8:14)*

***Yet even so, Solomon urges the person of faith not to become cynical and ungodly. Instead he assures us that justice will ultimately prevail and triumph.***

*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. 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. (Ecclesiastes 8:12-13)*

It is interesting that one of Solomon's concluding points is the realization that there must a day of judgment to rectify the inequities of this life! Sometimes that day of judgment is temporal; God intervenes and judges the ungodly in this life. But sometimes it will be only at the final day of judgment that evil is ultimately punished.

And in the meantime, life must still be lived, even if it is not always fair. Thus, again Solomon urges the reader to find the real enjoyment of life in spite of its inequities!

*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. (Ecclesiastes 8:15)*

### **Powerless to know the future**

*When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), and I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover. For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether it will be love or hatred; anything awaits him. (Ecclesiastes 8:16-9:1)*

Solomon in all his wisdom knew that no man, no matter how smart he thinks he is, can know what God has done. He has no formula based on the past by which he may predict also the future. All he can know is that he is God's hands; he is at God's disposal to accomplish His purposes.

That means that we cannot control our destiny. We can not know what the future holds for us, except this—that we will not escape death. And that leads by means of this transition into the final point of the section.

### **Powerless to prevent death**

*It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean, and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men.*

*Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they go to the dead.*

*(Ecclesiastes 9:2-3)*

Death is a universal leveler of men. It is the destiny of all of us. And we cannot circumvent its coming even by being good, observing holy rituals, worshipping God, or even guarding our speech. All of these are good things and Solomon does not mean to discourage their practice. He just wants us to remember that everybody has to face death, no matter how they've lived! However, the realization of this fact should change the way we view life.

*For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. Indeed their love, their hate, and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun.*

*(Ecclesiastes 9:4-6)*

Solomon's point is clear. Life is precious; it is the only time we have! The activities of earth do not continue past the grave; we cannot come back and finish what we didn't do here. (It is interesting that the JW's like to use these texts in Ecclesiastes to bolster the concept of the cessation of man's existence

at death. They miss Solomon's point! Solomon's point is not that there is no existence after death; his point is that earth's activities cease at death. There will be no future opportunities to prosecute the business of life!

Here is where faith takes hold. In view of the certainty of death, Solomon urges us to experience life to the full!

*Go then, eat your bread in happiness, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life, and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going. (Ecclesiastes 9:7-10)*

And with a final observation, Solomon brings us back where we started.

*I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise, nor wealth to the discerning, nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all. Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net, and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them. (Ecclesiastes 9:11-12)*

**Solomon ends with a final reminder of our powerlessness. Skill, power, wisdom, and ability are all manifestations of our earthly power; but all of them must succumb to two more powerful features—time and chance!**

**Conclusion: If we have properly understood Solomon's message, we have been made perhaps painfully aware of something we don't really like to think about—our powerlessness. It is a humbling experience to be reminded of these things. But when we honestly acknowledge them we are in a position to see the need to "fear God". Our lives are in His hands! Shouldn't this cause us to "fear Him and keep His commandments"?**