

### Wisdom “Under the Sun” – Benefits and Limitations

#### Ecclesiastes 8

Ecclesiastes 8:1-9: *“Who is like a wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man’s wisdom makes his face shine, and the sternness of his face is changed. <sup>2</sup> I say, “Keep the king’s commandment for the sake of your oath to God. <sup>3</sup> Do not be hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand for an evil thing, for he does whatever pleases him.” Where the word of a king is, there is power; and who may say to him, “What are you doing?” <sup>5</sup> He who keeps his command will experience nothing harmful; and a wise man’s heart discerns both time and judgment, because for every matter there is a time and judgment, though the misery of man increases greatly. <sup>7</sup> For he does not know what will happen; so who can tell him when it will occur? <sup>8</sup> No one has power over the spirit to retain the spirit, and no one has power in the day of death. There is no release from that war, and wickedness will not deliver those who are given to it. <sup>9</sup> All this I have seen, and applied my heart to every work that is done under the sun: There is a time in which one man rules over another to his own hurt.”*

#### Background Notes

In our studies of Ecclesiastes, we’ve seen that life is a big zero if you don’t look at it from God’s perspective. “Under the sun.” apart from divine revelation, life is meaningless and futile. It just doesn’t make sense. What possible meaning or what true happiness can you get out of life if, in the end, you just die like the animals, and cease to exist?

Without God and the truth of His revealed Word, there is no reason for living. You are just delaying the inevitable. Not a trace of you will be left, not even a memory. How an atheist can find any reason for living is beyond me! Either they’re not truly atheists - or they’ve kissed their brains goodbye.

But we know, and Solomon knew, that what we observe and conclude “under the sun” is not the whole story. God *does* exist, and He has revealed truth from “above the sun.” Life is worth living, and we can be truly happy! We can live life joyously when we see and live our lives in line with God’s viewpoint from “above the sun.”

Chapter 7 was very practical, with good and wise counsel for living. It gave us areas to avoid if we desire to please God and enjoy life as He intended it. Chapter 8 continues the wise counsel for living. This chapter is very practical, when interpreted properly in the overall context of Ecclesiastes.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. Wisdom “under the sun” has its benefits.

In verse 9 Solomon again used that significant phrase “under the sun”: *“All this I have seen, and applied my heart to every work that is done under the sun.”* Let’s summarize what Solomon was teaching verses 1 through 9, in the light of the entire book of Ecclesiastes - and in the light of all of Scripture: For us to get the big picture, we must have divine revelation and wisdom from “above the sun” - but there are benefits and some common sense principles on governing your life properly from “under the sun” wisdom as well.

#### **a. You have better understanding of matters concerning life and you act accordingly.**

*“Who is like a wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?”* (v1). For example, even wise unbelievers saw the present financial crisis coming and protected their investments. Wisdom under the sun has its benefits.

#### **b. Life goes more smoothly when you wisely submit to governing authorities.**

If you don’t revolt or dispute the word of the ruler, life is easier for you (v2-5). This “under the sun” counsel is actually commanded in the divine “above the sun” revelation in the New Testament. Read Romans 13, Titus 3, and 1 Peter 2 in this connection. Romans 13:1 says, *“Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities for there is no authority except from God and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.”* Titus 3:1 says, *“Remind them to be subject to the rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work.”* And 1 Peter 2:13-14 says, *“Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good.”*

#### **c. Wisdom “under the sun” understands some logical principles, such as:**

- there is a time and place for everything (v6)
- you cannot control the future (v7-8)
- you reap what you sow (v8)

Even unbelievers with common sense understand these logical and moral principles that operate in this world “under the sun,” where oppression and abuse of power exist (v 9).

Human wisdom is not to be despised. Wisdom under the sun does have its benefits, but wisdom under the sun has its limitations.

### 2. Wisdom under the sun has its limitations.

Human wisdom, apart from divine revelation, can only go so far. It is limited. Because of these limitations, we can only live properly when we have God’s “above the sun” perspective. What are some of the limitations to human wisdom?

**a. Human wisdom cannot understand apparent exceptions to the “law of retribution.”**

Verses 10-11: *“Then I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone from the place of holiness, and they were forgotten in the city where they had so done. This also is vanity. Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.”*

The wicked get honorable burials, and their wickedness is forgotten. This delayed judgment only encourages more evil. Verses 12-13 give us the answer: *“Though a sinner does evil a hundred times, and his days are prolonged, yet I surely know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him. But it will not be well with the wicked; nor will he prolong his days, which are as a shadow, because he does not fear before God.”*

Only when we realize that ultimately, in the end, the wicked will be judged and the righteous will be rewarded - only then does it all make sense. But this conclusion requires wisdom from “above the sun.” Apart from divine revelation, we would not understand why so often in this life, righteous people suffer what the wicked deserve, and wicked people receive the benefits the righteous deserve. Without divine revelation, we would agree with Solomon’s conclusion: *“There is a vanity which occurs on earth, that there are just men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked; again, there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity” (v14).*

**b. Human wisdom cannot comprehend the ways of God.**

Verses 16-17: *“When I applied my heart to know wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth, even though one sees no sleep day or night, then I saw all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. For though a man labors to discover it, yet he will not find it; moreover, though a wise man attempts to know it, he will not be able to find it.”*

God has purposely hidden some things from us. He has not revealed all of life’s mysteries (Ecclesiastes 3:11). It stands to reason that no matter how hard a person with human wisdom tries to understand the enigma and mysteries of life, he or she will never understand the ways of God - regardless of how wise a person is “under the sun”! If anyone had a chance to understand, it was Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived - but even Solomon acknowledged it was beyond him. Romans 11:33: *“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!”*

In Isaiah 55:9 the Lord said, through Isaiah: *“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.”*

Wisdom under the sun has its limitations.

## **Practical Application**

### **Don't practice Epicureanism based on Ecclesiastes!**

Epicureanism is the philosophy that advocates a hedonistic lifestyle: "more pleasure, less pain." It's named after the ancient philosopher, Epicurus. Look at verse 15: *"So I commended enjoyment, because a man has nothing better under the sun than to eat, drink, and be merry; for this will remain with him in his labor all the days of his life which God gives him under the sun."* Is this verse teaching that we should adopt Epicureanism - or hedonism - because of the despair of not being able to figure out life's mysteries? No, far from it!

It's the same positive approach that we saw back in chapters 2, 3 and 5:

Ecclesiastes 2:24, *"Nothing is better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand of God."*

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13, *"I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God."*

Ecclesiastes 5:18-19, *"Here is what I have seen: It is good and fitting for one to eat and drink, and to enjoy the good of all his labor in which he toils under the sun all the days of his life which God gives him; for it is his heritage. As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor—this is the gift of God."*

So even though there will be problems in this life, and situations that seem unfair, and circumstances that we can't figure out, and times when we wonder why God allowed such things to happen, and mysteries of life that are beyond us - when God is brought into the picture, and we get the divine perspective of life, we don't have to live miserable lives of despair. We can approach life as a gift from God. We can live joyously, and be happy, and plan to have good times together!

The rest of the Bible and what God has revealed will guard us and guide us in all areas as we enjoy the life that God has given us. Living joyously because we have the divine perspective is a far cry from hedonistic Epicureanism!

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