

An Empty Life? (10): The Quandary of Injustice

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

August 3, 2003

Please turn in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes, chapter 8. Solomon is not a linear thinker. Following the train of his logic can sometimes be difficult, and I confess openly to you this morning, following his logic in this chapter has escaped me altogether. But there is a main point in this chapter and that is what I want us to focus on.

Let us hear now God's word, beginning in Ecclesiastes 8:1.

Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter? Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter? A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam. 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. For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, though a man's trouble is heavy upon him. If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen? 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His Holy and inerrant word. Let's pray together.

Father, this is Your word; You caused it to be written for our instruction and edification. We pray now for the illumination of the Holy Spirit, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

I. Bad things happen in this world.

There are Christians who "hobbled" into church this morning because they carry burdens that are too big for them. They also carry grudges; they are angry about something that has happened, or not happened. And Satan has a hold of them and they are destroying themselves and others. It's what I think Solomon is talking about in this chapter. Life can be so unfair.

A company comes into town and the economic forecasts are over-the-top. You do your research. You ask counsel from those you trust, and you buy some stock—a lot of it. It's for your future; it's for your retirement; it's for your children. And then, it crashes and you hear a corporate scandal and corruption. You're just an innocent American trying to make a buck or two, and there's nothing you can do about it. Life can be so unfair.

You're driving along in a different state and blue lights begin to flash behind you. You look at the speedometer and you're doing 50 miles an hour in a 55 mile an hour zone. So you're a little apprehensive. You roll the window down. An officer is standing there and he says to you, "You were doing 75 miles an hour in a 55 mile an hour zone." You protest and say, "I wasn't." And before you know it, a revolver has been drawn and he tells you to get out of the car and on to the ground, and you feel a boot in your back. You're miles from anywhere and there's nothing you can do about it. Life can be so unfair.

You're a teenager, and you come home from school and there's tension. And what you dread has occurred. You've noticed the arguments, the quarrels. Mom and dad are not sleeping in the same bed anymore. But today, you hear that word that you've been dreading—divorce. And you go to bed that night and you

cry yourself to sleep, and there's nothing you can do about it. Life can be so unfair.

Bad things happen in this world. That's what Solomon observes. And they happen to *good* people. Well, that's how *you* see it. Look at how he puts it in verse 14. There's a vanity, a futility that takes place on earth. 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. Life can be so unfair. You try to live your life, as best you can, according to the golden rule, get along with your neighbors. You work from 9 to 5, you love your family and your kids and life can kick you in the teeth. It can be so unfair. That's what Solomon is talking about here in verse 11, that the sentence against and evil work isn't executed speedily.

Now, let me translate what Solomon is saying. Evil people should be punished. Right? And they ought to be punished immediately. Right? When people do bad things and get away with it, it just isn't fair. When you know that somebody is guilty, but he's caught up in the legal process for years and years and years, and he gets away with it. Life can be so unfair. There's no justice in this world.

Solomon begins the chapter—I told you he's not a linear thinker. I won't even begin to try and follow the logic of this chapter. He seems to be a little scatter brained here, but let me say that in the beginning of the chapter, he's talking about life under a civil authority—a king, a dictator, a tyrant. Maybe he's preparing Old Testament believers for the time of the Ptolemys of Egypt or the Seleucids of Babylon, perhaps. Look at verse 9. There are situations in this world where man—a king, a dictator—have power over another man to hurt. It may be your employer. He talks about the certainty of death and in the end even dictators will meet their death. That's not the main point. The point is life can be unfair. I was reading this week of a man by the name of Achmed. He comes from the Sudan and lives in France, as many of the North Africans these days do. He became a Christian, a believer. In 1998, he went home for family reasons. He was arrested and put in prison and tortured and nothing more has been heard from him. Life can be so unfair.

Here's something from this week's news. It will not mean much to you, I think, but let me try and make it mean something to you. John Leslie. I grew up with John Leslie. He was on that little small black and white—and it was black and white when I was growing up—that box in the corner known as a television. He was the host of a children's program called *Blue Peter*. *Blue Peter* was the television equivalent of the Boy Scouts. You know, they made things out of paper and cardboard boxes, and cereal badges, and they had badges and so on. It was good, clean television for children. They don't make television like that anymore. John Leslie was every mother's dream of a son-in-law. Two years ago, he was accused of sexual assault. Not in the states and not in your papers, but in the British papers it has been there on a weekly basis. The host of a TV program

accused of sexual assault. This week he was cleared—absolutely, totally exonerated. He stood on the steps of the Crown Court in London, and you know what his words were? Guess. Life can be so unfair. His life is in tatters.

II. How the world responds to unfair, unhappy circumstances.

So, what do you do? Here's one response. In verse 15, Solomon quotes what would be come the famous Epicurean philosophy. What do you do when life is unfair? “Well, let's eat and drink and be merry, because tomorrow we die.” Let's get the best we can because you just never know when, around the corner, life is going to bite you in the leg. So, let's get as much happiness and contentment as we can. It's the philosophy of Robert Herrick's famous poem *Hesperides*. “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may. Old time is still a flying. And the same flower that smiles today, tomorrow will be a dying.” Gather ye rosebuds while ye may. What's he saying? Enjoy life because you just never know when life is going to turn around and kick you. Without God, you see, that's the only philosophy you've got left. If you've got no other world view; if you've got no other perspective; if you've got no other apologetic; if you've got nothing that *transcends* this world; there's no better philosophy than that, is there? It's the philosophy of millions.

Isn't it strange, though, that people who don't believe in God still believe in something called “justice,” or “injustice,” “unfairness?” Why should you be bothered with unfairness if there is no God, if there is no order, if there is no structure? You know, if life is simply the random collocation of atoms, if it's just the luck of the draw, the roll of the dice, if that's what life is, and out of the same slime pool can come Shakespeare and Genghis Khan, then how could there be any justice, or injustice?

But that's not where we are—you and I, this morning. We believe in God. Not just any God; the God of Scripture. We believe in the Trinity; we believe in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has sent His Spirit into our hearts. We believe that God is in control; we believe that He orders all things, the end from the beginning. We believe that nothing happens without Him willing it to happen before it happens and the way that it happens. That's the problem. It's not just that life is unfair; God is unfair.

Now, don't misunderstand Solomon—and it's easy to misunderstand Solomon. Ecclesiastes isn't the only book in the Bible, and I'm grateful for that. There's more than what Solomon has to say. Solomon is giving one perspective; that's all. Bad things happen sometimes for very, very discernible reasons. Yes, they do. If you engage in an affair, my friend, and your wife says, “I want a divorce.” Don't you throw your hands up in the air and say, “Why are these terrible things happening to me?” If you drink and drive, and you knock someone down and kill them and you get thrown into prison for manslaughter, don't throw your hands up

in the air and say, "Why are these terrible things happening to me?" It's your own fault, because you have reaped what you have sown.

Sometimes things happen to us because God wants to train us; He wants to discipline us. As the Psalmist says in Psalm 119, "Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your Word." The affliction, the sorrow, the hurt, the trouble *steered* me back into the right direction. That's not what Solomon is talking about here. That's another perspective, another part of the mosaic of life. We need to get the whole picture, but Solomon is just giving one little facet of the picture, that you can be walking in the ways of God and keeping His Word and *still*, trouble comes to you. Why? And you know what Solomon's answer is? "I don't know." Even if a wise man stands up at the end of the chapter and says, "I know; I understand. I comprehend it all" -He's a seminary student, you understand - Solomon says, "You understand nothing. Because sometimes things happen to us that we can give no rhyme or reason to."

III. How the believer in God responds to unfairness in this earthly life.

Only this is certain –that God knows. And the important thing is, my friend, is not that you or I or the Church or the wise men or the theologians understand it. The important thing at the end of the day is that *God* understands it.

Do you see what Ecclesiastes 8 is calling for? I have to say, it's calling for it with a veil drawn all around it. It's not the clear light of sun that you might find in the pages of the New Testament, but you see what Solomon is saying? Sometimes the *only way* that you can live with the unfairness of it all, is trusting in the living *God!* Knowing that God loves you, and cares for you, and has you in the palms of His hands, and He will not let you go. That He has sent His Son to die for you, and if He has sent His Son to die for you, what is there that He will not do for you, in the end? It was the perspective of Sarah Edward, Jonathan Edwards' wife. Some of you will remember last Sunday evening I reminded you of how inordinately young she was when Jonathan Edwards first cast his eye upon her, and they were eventually to be married and to have children. Jonathan Edwards dies from an inoculation experiment for smallpox that he had agreed to undergo. He had just been given one of the most prestigious posts in the entire land. And God takes him away. Life can be so unfair. This is what Sarah says to her daughter. She writes a letter to her. "My very dear child, what shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. Oh, that we may kiss the rod and lay our hands upon our mouths. The Lord has done it. He has made me a door, His goodness, that we had your father so long. But my God lives and He has my heart. Oh, what a legacy my husband and your father has left us. We are given to God and there I am and love to be. Your affectionate mother, Sarah."

John Piper, in a sermon on Acts 11, tells of an occasion fairly recently, I think, where he met and spoke to Joni Eareckson Tada. Joni lifted up her hands as

high as she could in the braces that she has to wear as a quadriplegic, and this is what she said with a loud voice. "This is the prison where God has set me free; not free from pain, not free from limitation, not free from the frustration of it all, but the freedom to live—the freedom of life. That life is more than legs and skiing and jogging. It's about forgiveness; and it's about hope; and it's about love; and it's about meaning; and it's about eternal life; and it's about a relationship with Jesus. It's about knowing God and knowing that God will never, ever leave you or forsake you." That's what this final hymn is all about. We've just sung it. William Cowper's hymn, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." Cowper was a very troubled man. Psychologically, God had given him an enormous cross to carry all through his life. He wrote some marvelous hymns that we sing and this is one of them. "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform; He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm. Deep in unfathomable mines of never-failing skill, He treasures up His bright designs, and works His sovereign will."

We're going to sing together now, the final two verses of that hymn. "His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour; the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flow'r."

Let's sing verses 5 and 6 of hymn 128. Let's stand to sing.

His purposes will ripen fast, unfolding every hour; the bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan His work in vain; God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.

Grace, mercy and peace from God, our Father and Jesus Christ, be with you all. Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).