

Learning to Love our Limitations

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 November 2023

Preacher: Donald Smith

[0 : 0 0] Amen. So, please do keep that passage open in front of you. But let me just ask you a question. I think I often do ask you questions at the start of a sermon. If you ruled the world for a day, or a week, or let's go big, if you ruled the world for a year, what would you change? Your options are endless. Your sovereignty is complete.

What would you change? Maybe a four-day working week? That'd be nice, wouldn't it? Compulsory fry-ups for breakfast, double the state pension, less hours at school, make it a bit warmer in November in the northeast of Scotland. Maybe you'd go bigger, right?

World peace, put an end to cancer, are the many things that make people mourn? What would you do if you ruled the world?

I wanted to just hold on to that thought for a little while. In the meantime, we're going to run through Ecclesiastes 8, a first time. We're going to go through this evening's passage twice. The first time, we're just going to see what the teacher sees. And then after that, we're going to come back and consider what the teacher wants us to do off the back of what he's seen. I think it'll be helpful to go through the whole thing once over and see the complete picture together before we come back and hear the teacher's instruction for us. So let us do that together. Let us see what the teacher sees. And I think overall, right, if we're going to summarize it, I think the teacher sees what's called the plight of the powerless. He sees people who are powerless. And he sees that, I think, in three different areas, three different areas in this chapter. People who are incapable, impotent, unable to affect the change they might want to make. So, area number one is authority. You just look there, verse 3 and 4. What does it say? Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause. Why? For he will do whatever he pleases. The king will do whatever he pleases.

Verse 4. Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, what are you doing? We'll see a few different rhetorical questions through this chapter. Who can say to him, what are you doing?

[2 : 5 8] Well, no one can, can they? No one can question what he's doing. He takes his audience into the king's court and says, well, what say do you have in the decisions that are being made here?

If he was doing that for us today, he'd take us into the cabinet room in 10 Downing Street or Butte House. I'm pointing at the decisions that are being made in the room and say, well, what power do you actually have? You might get a vote every few years, but of the 200 laws that come out in a five-year term, how much input do you have on them? How much say do we get in what happens?

We saw a great example of this earlier this week. King Charles, I think by most accounts, a pretty important, influential man. You think surely he's quite powerful, but he's not in charge, is he? He doesn't get to decide the way things happen in our country. And so our king, having campaigned for the best part of 50 years of his life for various environmental causes, had to sit down in his speech to parliament and announce new licenses for oil and gas fields.

I'm not here to say whether that's a positive or a negative thing. The point is, I suspect if King Charles had any real power, he'd have rather not said that. But his opinions don't really count for that much, do they? When it comes to what gets written into law.

And if his don't count for much, I think we can be pretty sure that, well, mine and yours don't count for a whole lot either. The teacher sees the plight of the powerless in matters of authority. You are subject subject to the laws that govern your land, aren't you?

[5 : 11] You don't get to decide what those laws are. We don't have to stop at rulers and governments, do we? Your boss tells you when to show up at work. That's when you've got to show up at work.

Your boss tells you what to do at work. That's what you've got to do at work. Your lecturer tells you what essay you've got to write. That's what essay you've got to write. Your teacher tells you what homework you've got to write.

Maybe that's not a great example, actually, is it? But there's all sorts of things in life, isn't there, where we are just subject to authorities over us.

And there's not actually a whole lot we can do to change it. That's the first area. The teacher sees our powerlessness.

The second and third points we've actually seen already in the book of Ecclesiastes. So we'll move through them pretty quickly. Second point is time. You'll see in verse 5 there, the teacher moves, doesn't he, from authority through to time.

[6 : 15] And again, we see an area that we are just simply not in control of. Verse 7. It's another rhetorical question, isn't it?

Since no one knows the future, who can tell someone else what is to come? Who can say where time is going? Again, it's not any of us, is it?

We don't know. Time marches on, and we might love it if we would age more slowly, but we don't, because we're not in charge of it.

We might love it if the kids would grow up faster. We might lament that the kids seem to grow up so quickly. But we can't change it, can we?

Because we're not in control of time. You might wish that your lecture would hurry up and finish, or the day at work, or at school. But we're not in control of our time.

[7 : 20] He hammers that point home, doesn't he, in verse 8. As much power as you have over the wind, that is how much power you have over the approaching time of your death.

It is coming, and there's nothing we can do to change that. There's nothing we can do to change the day when it will come.

We are subject to authority, and we are subject to time. And then thirdly, and perhaps most painfully, we are powerless, often, over injustice.

Aren't we? Verse 14. There's something else meaningless that occurs on earth. The righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve.

We've seen that before in Ecclesiastes as well, haven't we? Do you remember at the end of chapter 3, start chapter 4, before Joe took us really helpfully through those passages, and reminded us so powerfully, didn't he, that injustice wasn't a problem in the past.

[8 : 41] It's not a problem that's stuck in the past. It's a problem that is still here today. Remember the case of Andrew Malkinson? But what the teacher is seeing here specifically in chapter 8 is kind of the other side of that.

It's the people who do what is wicked and seem to get away with it, scot-free. Just look back up there to verse 10. And I saw the wicked's buried, those who used to come and go from the holy place and receive praise in the city where they did this.

Verse 11, when the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, people's hearts are filled with schemes to do wrong. There is injustice.

There are people who do seemingly wicked things, and not only do they get away with it, they seem to get praised for it. We're not too far removed, are we, from the days of party-gate?

There's not much wrong with having a party, is there? But there's a lot wrong with having a party when you are simultaneously preventing people from visiting loved ones because it's deemed not safe to be near anyone.

[10 : 05] While they were partying, people's loved ones, perhaps your loved ones, were dying alone. That's not okay, is it?

What's the punishment? Well, two of the aides who orchestrated the events ended up on the Prime Minister's Honours list. The Prime Minister himself, well, he lost his job, didn't he, but has since racked up £6.5 million for various public appearances.

I've chosen that, because I think there's a consensus on it being an open and shut case, but there's so many more examples we could go into.

So many more ways in which the culture we live in venerates and celebrates people who believe in and promote things that are blatantly contradictory to what the Bible has proclaimed as righteous.

The wicked are praised, and we can scoff here, and we can shake our heads and tut-tuts, but what can we actually do about it?

[11 : 20] What can you and I, as individuals, actually do to change it? There is injustice in this country.

The wicked are praised here and now. But I think what the teacher wants us to know is that there is injustice in every country, and there is injustice at all times.

Here in 2023, 20 years ago, 100 years ago, 1,000 years ago, 3,000 years ago, there will always be injustice because, as we saw last week, there will always be sinners.

No one is righteous. Not one. And we might hate what we see, and it might make our blood boil, but how much power do we have to change it?

Yes. Let me go back to the very beginning and ask you a question. What would you change if you ruled the world for a year?

[12 : 38] I'm betting the answer would be something, at least, wouldn't it? Whatever exactly that might have been, I bet you it was something.

You would change something, if not many things. Here's what the teacher, I think, wants us to learn before he comes in with his really helpful application.

You would change things if you had the power to change them. But why haven't you changed the things you would change?

Why haven't I changed the things I would love to change? Because I can't do it. I don't have that power. We are subject to all these things, aren't we?

We are subject to authority. We are subject to time. We are sometimes subject to injustice. What the teacher is saying here is absolutely true, isn't it?

[13 : 50] It might not feel like a great pick-me-up for a Sunday evening, but he says it for a very good reason. It does really kind of go against the grain, doesn't it, of what we so often love to hear.

We love to get told that, you know, we can change the world. I remember at my graduation, the dean or provost, I have no idea what his title was, he was kind of doing his speech, and he addressed this group of students and said, I'm optimistic about the future because you're a part of it, and you can go from here and change the world.

And we love to hear that kind of thing, don't we? We love to hear that our opinion can change the world. We love to hear that we'll be able to make a lasting difference.

We love to hear it because we love to think we're powerful. But the teacher says, no, you're not. I've tried to use my words carefully there, but let me just be unmistakably clear.

You are incredibly valuable, precious, important, indeed, in the eyes of God. You are worth so much to him.

[15:17] You are so precious and valuable to God that he gave his own son for you. That's how much you matter in his eyes.

That's how much you matter to Jesus. He, who lived a perfect life, was willing to shed his own blood, was willing to hang there on a cross, bearing the whole wrath of God to save you.

You are incredibly valuable in the eyes of God. What the teacher is saying agrees with all of that, okay? Don't hear what the teacher is saying as if you don't matter or you're not important.

The problem that we're making there, right, is that we're thinking that important equals power or ability. But it doesn't. What the teacher wants you to know, and what is absolutely in line with the rest of God's word, is that, well, yes, you might be, and you are precious in the sight of God's.

You are also very, very, very weak. We are all small, and we are all weak.

[16:30] We saw that right at the beginning of this book, didn't we? Look at the universe. Look at all of history. Look at everything that's ever happened, and think of everything that will happen. Where do you fit into it all?

And the answer's got barely a little blip, isn't it? We are very, very, very weak. But let us turn now and go back through and see why the teacher is so desperate for us to recognize our own weakness.

And let me tell you, it is very good news. I remember in my last year's school, probably about 10 years ago now, myself and a bunch of classmates, we went to Peru for a month, as you do, and part of that kind of month trip, we went on a multi-day trek through a canyon.

You can tell how much I remember. I don't know how many days, and I don't know what canyon. But what I do remember about it, right, very clearly, was this. Day one of that trek was absolutely awful.

I hated it. I couldn't bear it. Day two was without doubt the most beautiful hike I've ever been on, and I remember the wonder of it so vividly.

[17:58] But the difference between day one and day two wasn't the terrain or the weather or the company. The difference was what was on my back.

A month's worth of clothes, foods and water for the trek, all kinds of absolute tat that I've bought thinking it was cool at the time, was all loaded into this rucksack and weighed probably half as much as I do.

And on day one, I had it on my back, and the whole day was downhill. You might think downhill sounds easy, but about six months before that, I had destroyed the ligaments in my knees.

And so with this weight on my back, every step downhill, my knees were crying out in agony to me because I just couldn't, I could barely bear the load of myself when I went downhill, but pile on some extra baggage and I couldn't handle it.

I wasn't the only one in the group suffering, and so, still slightly ashamed of this, but on day two, we hired some local guides with their mules.

[19 : 14] And on went the rucksacks, and off they went. I consoled my pride by telling myself I was doing my bit for the local economy. But a few steps into that day's journey, and I had no doubts whatsoever about my decision.

As soon as I set off, I wasn't thinking about the pain in my legs or the load in my back. I was looking up and enjoying the wonder and the splendor of God's glorious creation.

Now, it was all there the day before. I was in exactly the same place, but my ability to enjoy it was completely transformed by relieving myself of a burden I could not bear.

Why does the teacher so desperately want us to know that we are powerless, that we are weak?

He wants us to know so that we won't try and carry a load that we cannot bear. When we get to verse 15, it doesn't seem to fit at all, does it, with what's gone before?

[20 : 38] What's he seen so far before that point? He's seen a king who does whatever he pleases. He's seen time marching on. He's seen death coming and nothing we can do about it.

He's seen a world full of injustice where the wicked are praised and the righteous suffer as the wicked do. And then what does he say in verse 15? He says, so I commend the enjoyment of life.

And at first you think, where's that come from? That doesn't seem to fit with the passage, does it? I think after all that, how?

How am I supposed to enjoy this life in this world that you've just presented to us? Well, here's how. It says, remember you're weak.

Something we saw last week, isn't it? Remember how weak you are. And so remember, God is God and you are not. God is God and you are not.

[21 : 45] And when you stop trying to carry all the burdens of this world, you can finally look up and start enjoying the life he's given you.

understanding that God is God and we are not, that he is powerful and we are not. That is a wonderful truth to grasp, right?

It's not a dent in our pride. It is a weight off our shoulders. Because all of a sudden, all the problems in this world are not ours to bear.

when we live by faith in a good God, we are all of a sudden free. Faith is freedom from the unbearable pressures of life in a broken world.

Let's just go through again quickly and see how that works itself out in what the teacher wants us to do. First of all, he wants us quite simply to submit to authority.

[22 : 53] Verse 2, obey the king's commands. It's a wonderfully simple instruction, isn't it? Submitting to authority, I know, can be a huge topic where people might have lots of questions and well worth discussing in depth.

We're not going to do that now because the teacher's reasoning is not at all controversial or complex. Obey the king, obey ruler. Why?

Verse 5, whoever obeys his commands will come to no harm. It's a very simple command for a very simple reason.

If you don't commit a crime, you're not going to end up in prison. Wisdom is sometimes very obvious, yet we still need reminding, don't we? If you don't want a speeding ticket, don't break the speed limit.

If you don't want unwelcome visitors knocking on your door, pay for a TV license. Don't get rebuked at work by showing up on time. Do the work you're asked to do. Do your homework. There's many good reasons to do all those things, but here's the one the teacher wants to hammer home.

[24 : 08] Life will be more peaceful. It's so straightforward. Yet we often, don't we, like to convince ourselves that we know better. And so we make life more troublesome than it might need to be.

But that's not the point the teacher wants you to go away with. The point the teacher wants you to go away with is that you are subject to the authority. So even if you thought 85 was perfectly acceptable speed to be going, the speed camera doesn't care, does it?

Obey the king's command because then you will come to no harm. And we can do that freely and without doubt when we remember that God is God and we are not.

Because even if we doubt what the authorities tell us to do, even if we question their decisions or think we know better, they're not accountable to us, are they?

But they are accountable to God. The God who put them there. Faith is freeing because all of a sudden the authorities that we do not know whether or not we should trust, we might question their ways, we can actually say, well, God has put them there.

[25 : 29] God has put them over us. And He has called on us to submit to them. If they make mistakes, if they do things wrong, they'll answer to Him. But not to you or me.

And so the teacher says simply, obey the king's command. If you just look up there at the start of this chapter, it asks an absolutely crucial question.

Who knows the explanation of things? another rhetorical question with another straightforward answer. God alone knows, doesn't He?

He knows why the powers that be do what they do. He knows why injustice happens the way it does. He knows what is to come in the future.

He knows where time is going. I am weak. I don't know any of those things. But I can trust the one who does.

[26 : 40] That's what the teacher wants us to do secondly, isn't it? Obey the king's command and trust God. Trust God.

Look at what he says in the middle of that section on injustice. verse 12. Although a wicked person who commits a hundred crimes may live a long time, know that it will go better, well, good, with those who fear God.

In the midst of injustice, the teacher points us once more to the fear of God. He is the just judge who calls every action to account. Every injustice will one day be righted.

And we don't have to place the burden of righting those wrongs on ourselves when we live in the fear of God and we trust him. We trust him to do what he has said he is going to do, what he has given his son authority to do, not to you or me.

not saying we shouldn't fight against injustice when opportunities present themselves, I'm saying we should never expect injustice to end under the sun. But we can trust God and must trust God to deal with what he is in charge of and we are not.

[28 : 15] We say, Lord, I trust you. I trust you to do what I cannot do. I trust you to do what I cannot do.

Bring justice that I cannot bring about. And so then, thirdly and finally, we come again to verse 15. And maybe by now the teacher's conclusion is starting to make a little bit more sense.

So I command the enjoyment of life because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of life God has given them under the sun.

Having seen kings who do as they please, time that is running on, out of our control, an injustice that is running rampant, the teacher turns and says, enjoy life.

Enjoy the life you've been given. Enjoy it in all its goodness. You can enjoy life if you fear God. You can enjoy life if you fear God because then you will know that you can submit to the authorities knowing there's a greater and a good authority over them.

[29 : 32] You can enjoy life that is limited by time because you know that God is working all things for the good of his people and that eternity is waiting on the other side of under the sun. Yes, we should still lament injustice, but we can enjoy a world even where there is injustice because we know there is a just judge who will one day call it the account and so the teacher turns to us and says, remember, remember how weak you are and remember how good God is.

And then, it's not that we don't care, but we do let it go. Then we see actually yes, it's not on me to hold the decisions of our government to account.

It's not on me to stop the passage of time, to stop the day of death coming. It's not on me to stop the bad times in their tracks and it's not on me to keep the good times going.

That's not on me. It's not on me to right every wrong in the world. It's not on me to make sure there is no injustice. We are valuable.

We are important in the eyes of God. We've been given a purpose in Christ to be like him. But we are not powerful. We are weak and if we recognize our weakness, we can live in the fear of the Lord and enjoy the life we've been given.

[31 : 17] Trust God with the things of this world. Then you can go home this evening and sit on the sofa and just enjoy what God has given you to enjoy.

There is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Joe mentioned this morning that I'm on holiday next week.

Very much looking forward to it. I've got absolutely nothing planned whatsoever. But I do plan on enjoying my food and drink and not troubling myself with the great crises of this world, not because I don't care about them, but because I know and trust with all my body and soul that there is a good and gracious and powerful God who not only cares far more about them than I do, but is far more able than I am to bring about justice in his time.

Enjoy life when and while you can, because while the world might be a mess, you are weak and that's okay. When you go home this evening and your work and rest the week, don't fret about changing what God has not given you the power to change, but instead fear him by trusting him with what is outside of your control and enjoying what he has given you to enjoy.

Let us pray as we close. Father, we praise you as a God who we can trust with all things.

[33 : 22] We thank you that you are just and good and all powerful. help us to trust in you each and every day, to lean not on our own understanding, but that we would be filled with a healthy fear of you.

Help us to obey the authorities you have placed over us. Help us to trust in you in our time and in times of injustice.

And Lord, we pray, as we saw earlier in Ecclesiastes, that you would give us, each and every one of us here, the ability to enjoy the good things you have given us, knowing that you are God and we are not.

we thank you most of all for the greatest gift of all, your son, Jesus Christ, who lived this life. Help us to be like him in all that we do, that we might result in praise and glory and honour at his coming again.

In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.