

Life under Authority

Every now and then I will see a wasp, a bee, a fly or even a small bird trying to get through a clear glass window. It will fly into the window and bounce off it, and try again, and again, and again. Sometimes it doesn't give up until it is totally exhausted or even dead. The small creature cannot understand what is happening. It looks and sees the trees, the sky, and the outside world right in front of it. But as it tries to go forward, some kind of invisible barrier stops it. Because it can't see what that barrier is, it tries again and again. If something is invisible, you never know if it might have disappeared since the last time you tried. So the creature battles against something very real and present, but it does not understand it, and sometimes kills itself while grappling with it.

A lot of people look like those insects and birds when you watch them live their lives. They see the life they want to have; they see the freedom they want to enjoy, and they push ahead full steam, and they smack their faces straight into a barrier they couldn't see was there. Though they feel the pain of having run straight into it, they tell themselves there is nothing there, and their friends tell them the same things, and they re-double their efforts and push ahead as fast as possible and smack into that barrier again. If you could take a human being's life and speed it up and watch it in a few seconds, it would look very much like one of those insects: banging into that window and trying again, until collapsing at last.

What is the transparent piece of glass which human beings pretend is not there but keep banging into? What is the very real thing which seems so invisible to us? It is something that God has built into life, which man pretends isn't there: Authority.

God has built this world with authority. I do not merely mean that God has put some people in the world who function as authorities; I mean that authority is part of the way reality works, like the way an engine needs combustion and pistons. The world God has made has authority written into its DNA code, and the person who fights that fact will keep smacking into what he thinks isn't there.

I don't need to tell you that all authority is regarded cynically and suspiciously in our day. Songs scream anthems like "We Aren't Gonna Take It Anymore". Parents must not correct or direct their children; governments must not rule over citizens, pastors must not be direct with God's Word, managers must not tell their employees what to do. Being Anti-Authority seems glamorous, free-thinking, the "Braveheart" of our era. But a little bit of common-sense tells us what a mess our world would be if there was no authority.

In fact, the pattern of history is this: when authority goes, chaos reigns. But chaos is always temporary. Coming into that chaos is usually a dictator, a centralised authority who leads the people out. Think Hitler.

Solomon wants us to have the right view of authority. Remember, at this point in the book, he is no longer arguing, trying to prove that life is futile apart from God. He is now showing what it looks like to fear God in a sin-cursed world. And since authority is such an integral part of life- he wants us to have the right view of it. So he will do three things.

First, he will show us the cold facts of abused authority.
Second, he will remind us of wise dealing with people in authority.
Third, he will counsel us to be under the ultimate authority.

I. Authority is Often Abused

One of the hardest things to take is the fact that there are people in authority who are oppressive, unjust, foolish and lazy.

Ecclesiastes 8:9-11; 14 ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ ¶ 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. ¹¹ 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.

14 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.

Here Solomon describes men who rule others in a way that hurts them. He is an oppressive ruler. Verse 10 is very difficult in the Hebrew, but following the same thought in verse 9 means, The wicked who had been in and out of the holy place received an honourable burial and were praised. When an evil ruler is in place, then evil people are free to roam and are even memorialised. That thought goes on in verse 11 – the authority does not crack down on evil, so evildoers feel completely at liberty to do evil.

And verse 14 reports the sad reality: good people experience things that look like they are being punished, and wicked people look like they are being rewarded.

Ecclesiastes 7:15 *I have seen everything in my days of vanity: There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, And there is a wicked man who prolongs life in his wickedness.*

Solomon is not commending this; he is reporting it. This is what it is like to live in a world where authority is abused, where unjust men are in places of power. If we lived in different times, I might have to illustrate this for you for it to make sense. But I don't. Open the newspaper. Watch the news. Look around.

Ecclesiastes 10:5-7 *There is an evil I have seen under the sun, As an error proceeding from the ruler: ⁶ Folly is set in great dignity, While the rich sit in a lowly place. ⁷ I have seen servants on horses, While princes walk on the ground like servants.*

Sometimes you have fools and incompetent people sitting and ruling and legislating over others. Sometimes the manager knows less than his subordinate.

Ecclesiastes 10:16-19 *Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, And your princes feast in the morning! ¹⁷ Blessed are you, O land, when your king is the son of nobles, And your princes feast at the proper time -- For strength and not for drunkenness! ¹⁸ Because of laziness the building decays, And through idleness of hands the house leaks. ¹⁹ A feast is made for laughter, And wine makes merry; But money answers everything.*

Sometimes the rulers are plain lazy and negligent. Sometimes they are simply lining their own pockets.

And we needn't stop at merely governmental authority. There are many husbands who are abusive, neglectful, uninvolved, unfaithful or lazy. There are many parents who are unjust, cruel, lazy, hypocritical and abusive. There are managers and business owners who are greedy, cut-throat, impossible, and tyrannical. So we could go down the line and see authority abused in magistrates and Supreme Court Justices, policemen, lawyers, traffic officers, tax officials, school teachers and principals, sports coaches – the list could go on. Authority is everywhere you turn. And everywhere you turn, that authority is abused.

So what do we do?

Our first reaction is to say, if the authority is evil, we don't have to obey it. In other words, if the authority is bad, dispense with the authority. Well, not so fast. God makes a distinction in His mind between the office of the authority and the person's use of authority.

You might be justly angry at how humans use authority, that does not mean you can dispense with

the idea or fact of authority.

Romans 13:1 *For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.*

You see the fundamental fact is this- if you oppose an authority structure which God has put in place, you oppose God. So what do we then do? How do we live in a world where God wants us to submit to authority, but where that authority is at best imperfect and at worst, very crooked.

In fact, that leads us to Solomon's next point about authority, which is this

II. Respond to Rulers with Wisdom

Ecclesiastes 8:2-4 *I say, "Keep the king's commandment for the sake of your oath to God. ³ "Do not be hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand for an evil thing, for he does whatever pleases him." ⁴ Where the word of a king is, there is power; And who may say to him, "What are you doing?"*

Solomon says submit to your earthly authorities as far as it is possible. It is unwise to oppose duly appointed authority.

Romans 13:1-2 *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. ² Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.*

Romans 13:5 *Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake.*

Ephesians 5:22 *Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.*

Ephesians 6:1 *Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.*

Ephesians 6:5 *Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ;*

Hebrews 13:17 *Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.*

And guess what? The submission is not to be in action only, but in attitude:

Ecclesiastes 10:20 ²⁰ *Do not curse the king, even in your thought; Do not curse the rich, even in your bedroom; For a bird of the air may carry your voice, And a bird in flight may tell the matter.*

Don't grumble and murmur about them either. Don't hate them in your hearts and wish evil upon them. Solomon says that even your evil thoughts about your authorities have a way of coming out. To submit in action while rebelling in attitude is not really submission. Solomon warns against that kind of response:

Ecclesiastes 10:4 *If the spirit of the ruler rises against you, Do not leave your post; For conciliation pacifies great offenses.*

Solomon's counsel is against angry reactions and rebellion. Don't storm out the room when someone above you doesn't give you your way, or says something you don't like.

But what about when the authority asks us to do something wrong? What about when their commands are unreasonable or foolish? The next few verses tell us:

Ecclesiastes 8:5-7 ⁵ *He who keeps his command will experience nothing harmful; And a wise man's heart discerns both time and judgment, ⁶ Because for every matter there is a time and judgment, Though the misery of man increases greatly. ⁷ For he does not know what will happen; So who can tell him when it will occur?*

The wise person knows there is a time and place for everything. There is a time to make an appeal, and there is a way in which to do it. There is a time to make an appeal to an authority, and there is a time to accept unjust treatment and suffering as the will of God. There is a time to respectfully

challenge a decision, and there is a time to accept it. There is a time to flee from ungodly authority, and there is a time to stay.

Just think of some people in the Bible who had to approach their authorities:

Think of Nathan having to approach David after his affair with Bathsheba. He was careful, tactful and very wise.

Think of Abigail, when she tried to persuade furious David not to go in and kill Nabal.

Think of Jonathan speaking to his father Saul about David.

Think of how David treated Saul when he had the chance to kill him.

Think of Peter and John before the Sanhedrin.

You know what all these people had in common? They respected the position, and humbly challenged the decision when it violated God's Word. They were able to make a distinction in their minds between God's will being fulfilled that this person be in authority, and God's will being violated in their decisions.

Whether it is a husband, a parent, a manager, a boss, a governmental law, an official, you must recognise there is the right God has given them, and there are the decisions they make. Unless a decision violates God's Word, it should be respected. Where it does violate God's Word, you can oppose the decision, without rebelling against the position.

To do that, you need to realise that all human authority is limited.

Ecclesiastes 8:8 *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.*

No human authority has ultimate power over life and death.

Should bad decisions be challenged? Yes. Should Christians refuse to obey commands to sin? Yes. But that is something different from trying to oppose or overthrow the authority structure itself. How could these people submit to authority on earth, when it was often so imperfect, so corrupt, so misguided? Only one way: if they had made God the ultimate authority in their lives. The idea in the second part of the verse seems to be that people can't take a holiday from battle, so evildoers can't walk away from the ultimate authority.

And that's where this all leads.

III. Submit Joyfully to the Final Authority

Ecclesiastes 8:12-13 *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. ¹³ 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.*

The one who fears God is more than anything, the one under authority. To fear God is to have entered into a relationship with God. As we're often saying, the nature of what you love determines the nature of the love. You love an ice cream one way, and you love a dog another. You love a good book one way and you love your cousin another. Who or what they are determines how you love them. So if the Person in question happens to be the Sovereign Creator and Owner of the Universe, what will that love look like? It will be a submissive love. The fear of the Lord is a submission to His will. The last verse of the book links the two:

Ecclesiastes 12:13 *Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, For this is man's all.*

It is a religion foreign to the Bible that puts loving God and fearing God as opposites. It is a religion foreign to the Bible that makes submission to the Lordship of Jesus somehow opposite to, or hostile

to, the concept of grace.

The gospel of grace is just this: you are born a rebel. And you are born a rebel into a universe where rebellion will ultimately be crushed. But you spend your life rebelling and asserting our own way. You rebel against your parents before you can walk. You rebel against your schoolteachers. You rebel against your church leaders. You rebel against managers and employers. You rebel against the law of the country. Your whole life you seek to make life work your own way and live it according to your own law.

And while you are facing the other way, the Lord of All comes your way, and confronts you with truth. He doesn't judge you on the spot; He sends out a warning and an invitation. He says, you cannot live in my universe, as my tenant and keep rebelling. I have made provision to cancel the debt of your crimes of rebellion by dying on the cross. I have made provision for your bankrupt state by giving offering my perfect life to stand in for yours. But now, you must surrender. You must throw down your weapons. You must not continue on your path of selfishness and lawlessness. You must come back to Me and submit. You must receive Me as your life and take your place as a joyful subject under me.

Romans 14:7-9 *For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*

To the believer, the Lordship of Jesus Christ is precious doctrine. I have a Lord. I have a King. He is the wisest, kindest and most gracious Lord you could possibly imagine. I do not want to keep striving against the wind. I want a Shepherd. I want a Master. I gladly take my place under His yoke, for it is easy, and light.

The problem with legalism is not that it calls for obedience. The problem with legalism is the master it calls you to serve. It calls you to serve an impersonal master of a set of standards. It calls you to serve your own pride, which is never satisfied. It calls you to serve the fickle god of man-pleasing. And because those gods are no gods, there is no grace, there is no joy and there is no satisfaction.

But once again, if God is your only God – if He is the One you seek ultimate satisfaction in, then your obedience is to a loving Master. You obey of Him, through Him, and to Him.

You see, the person who is truly submitted to the Lord, has no problem with authority in the rest of his or her life. If you have settled the big issue of submission to your Owner, it is a small thing to submit to that husband, that parent, that employer, that pastor, that government. And furthermore, it gives all your submission a goal. I submit to this, because it is part of submitting to the Lord.

So guess what kind of life you have when you are not fighting against the very structure of the universe?

A joyful life.

Ecclesiastes 8:15 *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.*

So when you're chafing against all kinds of human authority in your life, do some tests. First, how is my submission to Christ? Have I acknowledged His sovereign Lordship, and His will in placing this authority in my life? Have I discerned the difference between the office of authority which God requires submission to, and the imperfect and even sinful exercise of that authority, which requires differing responses at different times? Have I joyfully accepted authority as part of God's design?

God has wired this world to work around authority and submission. The most fundamental things you can do are to recognise your rebellion against the Most High God. You were made and placed in a universe owned by God. You can't change that anymore than you can change your height or your date of birth. You did not choose to be born, but this is the world you're in. You can keep doing the insect or little bird thing with the window your whole life. You can keep re-doubling your efforts and insist that there is no limitation in life except the limits of my own mind. But you will keep hitting something you say isn't there. The pain and the sorrow and the injury you will experience from insisting upon trying to live independently of God will in the end break you, like the exhausted bird that collapses at the bottom of the window.

It starts with submitting to His authority in His Son, who is forever the Lord of all creation. It starts by saying, "Lord, I am not a sun, I am a planet, and you are at the centre, and I live to revolve around you". It goes on to acknowledge how God delegates and imparts that authority in life, through imperfect, and sometimes sinful people. Don't kick against them, try to destroy them or pretend they aren't there. Submit joyfully to God as far as you can through the human authorities God places in your life.