

## Ecclesiastes 8

### Government and Final Justice

I pray that this series on the book of Ecclesiastes has been an inspiration and blessing to you. Many commentaries on this Old Testament book suggest that it not be taught to a congregation. They suggest that it is too deep and weighty of a book and that it can be depressing. Speaking for myself, it has been difficult at times to work through, but I have learned a lot. I hope that you have too.

In our last study, Solomon told us that gaining wisdom is good, but that it has its limitations. There is worldly wisdom which is gained academically or by reason of age and experience. And there is biblical wisdom. It is good to have both kinds of wisdom. But worldly wisdom can be influenced by Satan.

In the New Testament book of James<sup>1</sup> we are told that demonic wisdom is earthly, that its limits are bound to the secular and material sides of life. It is sensual, full of human passions and frailty. It is demonic, influenced by Satan who blinds people to the truth and manipulates the course of this world.<sup>2</sup> The results of this wisdom are bitterness, envy, selfishness, confusion and every evil work.

On the other hand godly wisdom gained by knowing and obeying the Word of God is pure. It is full of integrity. There are no mixed motives. It is peaceable, loving and promoting peace. It is gentle, there is a sweet reasonableness about it that will compromise and thus it is willing to yield. It is full of mercy and good works. It is without partiality and hypocrisy. In this life none of us will exhibit the full blessings of this godly wisdom. But we can exhibit enough of it to make a difference in our country, where we work and with the people we know.

In our present passage of Scripture from Ecclesiastes Solomon, also called here Qoheleth (in Hebrew) or the Preacher presents a picture of a wise person who serves a king. The trouble is this king often makes arbitrary and unjust commands.

Who is like a wise *man*?  
And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

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<sup>1</sup> James 3:13-18

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:4; Ephesians 2:1, 2

A man's wisdom makes his face shine,  
And the sternness of his face is changed.  
(Ecclesiastes 8:1)

The wise person is someone who knows how to handle difficult problems. The word translated "interpretation" would probably be better translated as "solution." To be wise enough to know what to do in every difficult situation is rare, but it can happen. To give an example think of Daniel and his friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

As young men they were carried away as captives from Jerusalem to Babylon to work in King Nebuchadnezzar's royal court. But because these young men remained faithful to God we are told that "in all manner of wisdom and understanding they were ten times better" than all of the other servants of the king.<sup>3</sup> In fact there was a radiance in their appearance and personalities.<sup>4</sup>

It often happens that godliness shows itself in your demeanor. People who live without God in the world often have a hardness or crassness about them. But the deep joy that comes from knowing God turns the frown upside down into a smile full of grace. The world tells you to "put on a happy face." But as a believer that happiness is not put on, it comes from the inside out. Psalm 34:5 states that when we look to God and trust Him our faces can be radiant and without shame.

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."

<sup>4</sup>Where the word of a king is, *there is power*;  
And who may say to him, "What are you doing?"  
(Ecclesiastes 8:2-4)

In its original context these verses refer to life in a king's royal court. But the principle can apply to how we relate to the government we have and even with our employer or boss at work. Our first duty is obedience therefore the Preacher tells us to "Keep the king's commandment." A wise person will do what he or she has been asked to do as long as it is not evil. Jesus said to "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's."<sup>5</sup> The apostle Peter wrote,

Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel 1:20

<sup>4</sup> Daniel 1:15

<sup>5</sup> Luke 20:25

for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme,  
14 or to governors...  
(1 Peter 2:13, 14)

Here in Ecclesiastes this obedience is also bound by an oath sworn before God to serve the king. In our lives today our obedience may be bound by our pledge of allegiance to our country or the promises we made to our employer. In the New Testament book of Titus the apostle Paul said that when we serve well, when we do what is good at work or in our communities we "adorn the doctrine of God."<sup>6</sup> In other words a honorable and virtuous life makes knowing and believing in God attractive to other people.

But there are limits to obeying the government or our employer, especially when we are asked to act contrary to Scripture. For example, when the rulers of Jerusalem told Peter and John to stop teaching about Jesus Christ Peter replied, "We ought to obey God rather than men."<sup>7</sup> Solomon assumes we will find ourselves in situations like this back in verse 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.  
(Ecclesiastes 8:3)

Solomon is not telling us that we can never disobey the government or an employer. But he is telling us not to act too hastily. Don't storm out of the room. If you did that in ancient times to a king you could be killed. Don't rebel in an unrighteous way. Don't unnecessarily embarrass or arouse to anger those who are in authority. Proverbs 14:35 says, "The king's favor is toward a wise servant, But his wrath is *against* him who causes shame."

He who keeps his command will experience nothing  
harmful;  
And a wise man's heart discerns both time and judgment,  
(Ecclesiastes 8:5)

In other words, the wise person knows what the right thing is to do and the right manner and time to do it.

Because for every matter there is a time and judgment,  
Though the misery of man increases greatly.

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<sup>6</sup> Titus 2:9, 10

<sup>7</sup> Acts 5:29

<sup>7</sup> For he does not know what will happen;  
So who can tell him when it will occur?  
(Ecclesiastes 8:6, 7)

Sometimes it is hard to immediately know what the right solution is. As Solomon has often pointed said the troubles and frustrations of life are numerous. These troubles in life are compounded by the fact that we cannot predict the future. And there are always questions: "Will the material we need to finish the job get here in time? Will he or she do his or her part of the project? Will the stock market rise or fall? Will the government go into more debt? Will there be war." And the biggest question of all is "Will I live or die tomorrow?"

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.  
(Ecclesiastes 8:8)

Not a one of us has the power of life and death. Someday we will take our last breath and that will be it. Therefore the wise way to live is to trust and obey God and follow our Lord Jesus Christ. We should do our work, enjoy life and share the grace and love of God with others. Unfortunately, there are people who live otherwise.

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.*  
(Ecclesiastes 8:9)

This verse should read "There is a time when one man rules over another and makes him suffer." We see this injustice many times in both government and at work. And sometimes those who lord it over others have more money, more power and experience more earthly pleasures than the people of God. Sometimes it is right to stand up against injustice like this, but sometimes you can't. This is when you need wisdom, biblical wisdom. The apostle James wrote that if we need godly wisdom ask for it in faith and God will grant you wisdom in abundance.<sup>8</sup> And our Lord Jesus teaches us the great principle of servant leadership saying, "Whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant...For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve..."<sup>9</sup>

Then I saw the wicked buried, who had come and gone

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<sup>8</sup> James 1:2-8)

<sup>9</sup> Mark 10:43-45

from the place of holiness, and they were forgotten  
in the city where they had so done. This also is vanity.  
(Ecclesiastes 8:10)

The Hebrew in Ecclesiastes is often difficult to translate. And for the difficult verses various translations of the Bible have different meanings. To the best of my judgment I think the word “forgotten” should be translated as “praised.” Here is how the Revised English Bible translates verse 10.

It was then that I saw the scoundrels who had funerals  
in the holy place and they were praised in the city.

In other words speeches full of praise were heaped upon the powerful people at their funerals even though they were evil. Solomon said that this is not right. It is not just. But some dictators do prevail. Wall Street robs investors and makes huge profits and hardworking people lose their homes. A fellow worker stabs you in the back in a project you are both working on and he gets the promotion. The student who cheated got an “A.” The reason people are like this is given in the next verse.

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.  
(Ecclesiastes 8: 11)

Here we get insight into the sinful hearts of people. Many times in life justice is so slow or there is no justice at all. Therefore people think they can get away with doing wrong and sometimes they do. But it's only a matter of time before their parade hits the wall of God's justice.

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.  
<sup>13</sup> 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.  
(Ecclesiastes 8:12, 13)

The reason why God does not throw down lightning bolts on the wicked is that He is patient and kind. In His wisdom He is giving the wicked either time to repent or time to fill up their iniquity.<sup>10</sup> Scoffers say there is no God, there is no ultimate justice. There is no value or meaning in life so do as you please. But

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<sup>10</sup> Romans 2:4-11; 2 Peter 3:7-10

judgment is coming, maybe sooner than they think.<sup>11</sup> And the day of their death seals their judgment. But life is often not fair and just now.

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.  
(Ecclesiastes 8:14)

Sometimes, too often, good people face troubles in the world that the wicked should face. And many times there is nothing anyone can do about it. So how shall we live?

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.  
(Ecclesiastes 8:15)

In spite of all the injustice and vanity of life it is possible for us, the people of God, to find enjoyment in the simple things of life. Have a dinner party. Go out for some ice cream. Solomon is not telling us to ignore wrong doing. There are times when we can right a wrong. But there are times that we cannot. Solomon is pushing us to feel the emptiness and wickedness of this age so that we passionately yearn for another age—the coming kingdom of God. Still, wise people will find delight in the things God now gives us: family, good friends, the sweet face of a baby, a good day's work.

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,<sup>17</sup> 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*.  
(Ecclesiastes 8:16, 17)

Solomon declares that he tried so hard to understand life. He even stayed up many nights working on it. But unless God reveals things to us by His written

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<sup>11</sup> Psalm 55:23

Word or by special revelation, there are some mysteries of life we will never figure out. As God told Isaiah,

For My thoughts *are* not your thoughts,  
Nor *are* your ways My ways," says the LORD.  
⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
So are My ways higher than your ways,  
And My thoughts than your thoughts.  
(Isaiah 55:8, 9)

Solomon began this section encouraging us to gain biblical wisdom so that we can survive and even thrive in this world. But we also need to learn to live with our inability to understand all of life now. We will not understand "all the work of God" until that day when we know all things even as we are now known by God. As the apostle Paul wrote,

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face.  
Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. <sup>13</sup> And now abide faith, hope, love, these three;  
but the greatest of these *is* love.  
(1 Corinthians 13:12, 13)

Let us be wise and live lives of faith, hope and love—especially love.