

Notes & References

Man's Rule & God's
Ecclesiastes 8

August 13, 2017

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A. Does Wisdom Have Any Value? 8:1

1. "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." (NKJV)

2. Solomon's Theme

- a. this theme was introduced in the first part of the book: "1:2 Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher; "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. ... 1:14 I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind." (NKJV)
- b. he then explores the truth of this statement from various points of view: from nature, from pleasure, from labour, and then from wisdom itself – and the discovery is this that all these are meaningless when God is left out of one's view of the world.
- c. he continues looking at other aspects and concludes that there is nothing better – and remember that Solomon does this from the Old Testament perspective where the truth of the New has not yet been revealed – nothing better than to rejoice in the blessings God has given to you
- d. in this latter part of the book of Ecclesiastes, there are no new exploration into other aspects but he rather repeats and enlarges on those found in the first part of the book.

3. Wisdom's Benefits

- a. so now he returns to the matter of wisdom: if it cannot discover the meaning of life, does it provide any advantage over folly
- b. as he noted before – "And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness." (Ecclesiastes 2:13) – the answer is yes
- c. when God is included in your viewpoint – and the context shows that he is now deliberately including God – then wisdom has benefits
- d. note that in this book, 'wisdom' is not the idealised spiritual wisdom that is found in the opening chapters of the book of Proverbs, but rather a combination of prudence, understanding and common sense
- e. first of all, this kind of wisdom allows its possessor to examine and to evaluate events – to know 'the interpretation of a thing' – so that he is able to rise above the things that happen around him and to him, to see their cause, to learn from them and to live with them
- f. in difficult times, when his face might be stern or dark, this wisdom that includes God and brings light to his

countenance so that it shines into a smile or beams with good will

- g. in the verses that follow, Solomon applies this principle to a number of areas of life that can trouble one's life, where wisdom can help you to look beyond the trouble to the sunshine, as it were

B. Do You Trust Government? 8:2-6

1. Earthly Rulers (2a)

- a. "I say, "Keep the king's commandment ..." (NKJV)
- b. from one perspective, the king in the middle East at that time (of which Solomon was one!) were totalitarian, possessing unquestioned power, so that we might not feel that what follows means much in today's democratic society – "rule by the people"
- c. but considered further, the difference is more mere words than real
- d. and same truths were written by Paul a millennium later: "Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. ..." (Romans 13:1a)
- e. and both Paul and Solomon give some very cogent reasons for such obedience.

2. Our Responsibility to God (2b)

- a. the 2nd verse concludes "... for the sake of your oath to God." (NKJV)
- b. for Israel, the king was God's Messiah, the one anointed of God, and was God's representative on earth – that is, God is the King of Israel
- c. but the truth of God's Sovereignty is wider than that one nation, for Nebuchadnezzar, absolute ruler of the Babylonian Empire, had to accept that "... the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whomever He wishes." (Daniel 4:32) and to confess, "... But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'" (Daniel 4:35)
- d. Paul writes, "... For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves." (Romans 13:1b-2)
- e. this does not endorse the false idea of the 'divine right of kings', but that for His own eternal plans and purposes, "His good pleasure", He brings into authority both good and evil rulers
- f. when Paul wrote those words, Nero was the Roman Emperor!
- g. we obey because as a citizen of heaven we are also a citizen of the country in which we live with a responsibility

3. Punishment Exists (3-4)

- a. 3-4 "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?" (NKJV)
 - (A) again, these words initially may sound remote in time & space; but are they really?
 - (B) there have been over the past 100 years places where they have been and still are literally true: rulers who answer to no one
 - (C) and even in a democratic country as ours, politicians enact laws which are met by indifference by the majority but occasion much angst and frustration to believers
 - (D) so that it is still said "You can't fight City Hall" – it is hopeless for most of us to gain a point against entrenched bureaucracy
- b. and, if we do decide to disobey – to take a stand against the law
 - (A) there is a price to be paid, "... But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil. Wherefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake." (Romans 13:4-5 NAS)
 - (B) in addition to doing this "for conscience' sake", because God has commanded it, government has the forceful deterrent of power
- c. so we obey government because it "bears the sword", having power to penalise those who fail to do say
 - (A) in Britain, it is the nebulous "Crown" which represents the law of the land which can exact punishment from those who break it
 - (B) in the US, this power is given by agreement to the Constitution
 - (C) in Canada, it derives from the document creating this country
 - (D) in Israel, it was the right given by God to His king as the supreme earthly judge in the nation

4. That Good Result (5-6)

- a. we obey government since it exists for a good purpose in God`s eyes
 - (A) Paul writes, "For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behaviour, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. ..." (Romans 13:3-4a)
 - (B) and Peter, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who

do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.” (1 Peter 2:13-15)

- b. these words are quite in agreement with Solomon`s
 - (A) 5-6 “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.” (NKJV)
 - (B) or `will experience no trouble,` or `evil`
 - (C) from the earliest recorded history and remotest societies, we find that people (or God, in the case of the people of Israel) appointed people to rule over them in order to make and to enforce laws that were for the benefit of the people themselves
- c. that the people we elect are frail and faulty, and their laws imperfect, in no way diminishes that by and large those who enter the public sphere of politics do so with a sincere desire for the common good, and that we all benefit by the government they provide
- d. although at times we must feel agreement with Will Rogers, when he said, “We ought to be grateful that we don't have as much government as we've paid for!” –{2}.

5. the wisdom that takes God into account; the person who knows Jesus Christ as Lord of their life, can be confident in their trust in God despite earthly rulers, and have influenced such rulers for good.

C. Who Is In Control? 8:7-9

- 1. of the Future (7)
 - a. “For he does not know what will happen; So who can tell him when it will occur?” (NKJV)
 - (A) it is now 40 years since the Cray super-computer was first used in Europe to make medium range weather forecasts
 - (1) many times its original power is now being used
 - (2) and it still rains when the washing is put out to dry
 - (B) we do not know what is going to happen, so how can we possibly know when it will happen?
 - (C) you and I are not in control of this
 - b. yet the Christian can sing
 - Many things about tomorrow,
 - I don't seem to understand;
 - But I know who holds tomorrow,

And I know who holds my hand. —{3}.

2. of Life (8)

- a. "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." (NKJV)
 - (A) the word translated 'spirit' can equally well be translated wind or breath and no matter which they all mean the same here
 - (B) you can no more delay your day of death – no more have control over your life breath – than you can turn away the wind by blowing it!
- b. in this battle to stay alive, fight as wickedly as you may, death comes
- c. so the Psalmist, with wisdom that takes God into account, prays, "So teach us to number our days, That we may present to Thee a heart of wisdom." (Psalms 90:12 NAS) – we are not in control

3. of Oppression (9)

- a. even Solomon, with all his power had to confess that as he looked out over his kingdom and people
 - (A) "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." (NKJV)
 - (B) occasions arise where one man, having authority, uses it to hurt another person: Robbie Burns' "man's inhumanity to man"
- b. this innate cruelty – sin – in man is outside of man's control

4. so wisdom that takes God into account, sees that what God's word says is true, and it affirms, rather than weakens, his trust in God – and thereby is able to live for God in this imperfect world

D. Where Is There Any Justice? 8:10-13

1. Man's Evil (10-11)

- a. "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." (NKJV)
- b. it appears that men can do evil and never suffer for it
 - (A) this theme appears more than once in Ecclesiastes
 - (B) it also appears more than once in our newspapers

- (C) in fact, a person who has lived with a debased life style, a callous indifference to right and wrong, because they are the rich and famous, can have a marvellous funeral from a great and splendid cathedral, with honours and eulogies
- (D) where is the justice in this?
- c. others behold that this is the case
 - (A) "I have seen a violent, wicked man Spreading himself like a luxuriant tree in its native soil." (Psalms 37:35 NAS)
 - (B) so they follow in his wicked way, knowing that punishment is delayed – and apparently never comes
 - (C) where is the justice in this?
 - (D) but David saw, "Then he passed away, and lo, he was no more; I sought for him, but he could not be found." (Psalms 37:36 NAS)

2. God's Rule (12-13)

- a. "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." (NKJV)
 - (A) though punishment does not appear to take place, and in fact the one who is wicked seems to prolong his days in his evil, yet in reality that length of life is but a shadow
 - (B) since he does not reverence God, it is not well with his soul
 - (C) eternity will bring out God`s righteous justice which does not take place in this world
- b. yet, it will be well for those who fear God, give reverence before Him
 - (A) the Bible gives the reason for the delay of justice
 - (B) it is to give opportunity for a man to come to salvation
 - (C) "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9 NAS)

3. the Christian possesses the wisdom that takes God into account, and in the midst of whatever situation they find themselves can recognize that man`s injustice will cease and God`s justice will out

E. Application

1. who rules in this world, man or God? ... in your life, you or Lord Jesus?

2. Heavenly Citizens

a. the songwriter wrote

This world is not my home
I'm just a-passing through
My treasures are laid up
Somewhere beyond the blue.^{4}.

b. but Paul makes the truth more pertinent to the here and now as well as to the future: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself." (Philippians 3:20-21 NAS)

3. Child-like Trust

a. remembers that it is God`s rule that counts

b. as in the words the children`s hymn,

With Christ in the vessel
We can smile at the storm, Smile at the storm, Smile at the storm
With Christ in the vessel
We can smile at the storm, As we go sailing home

c. may the Holy Spirit apply these truths to our individual needs

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AV	Authorized (King James) Version of 1769
NAS	New American Standard version © 1960, 1995 The Lockman Foundation (usually the 1995 edition)
NIV	New International Version © 1984 by the International Bible Society
NLT	New Living Translation © 1996 Tyndale Charitable Trust
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NRSV	New Revised Standard Version © 1989 National Council of Churches of Christ
RSV	Revised Standard Version © 1946, 1952 National Council of Churches of Christ; Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd

Some of the commentaries and resources used in the preparation of this message are identified as follow:

- BM – Biblical Museum, Editor James Comper Gray, ca 1870
- EBC – The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, © 1986 Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 49530, MI:
Calvin Calvin’s Commentaries
- Gill – Exposition of the Old Testament, Exposition of the New Testament, by John Gill, D.D.
- JFB – Jamieson, Fausset & Brown
- K&D – Commentary on the Old Testament – Keil & Delitzsch – Eerdman’s, 1959
- Kerux – The sermon & illustration data base compiled by Rev. David Holwick at the web-site, www.holwick.com.

2. From *'Can We Trust Government?'*, a message by Revd Ray Stedman – Kerux sermons # 5392
3. *'I Know Who Holds Tomorrow,'* by Ira Forest Stanphill (1914-1993)
4. *'This World Is Not My Home,'* by Mary Reeves Davis