

Wisdom for Living in an Unjust World

Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

April 22, 2012

Introduction:

You've probably been wondering what happened to our study through Ecclesiastes. Well, we haven't totally abandoned that pursuit as vanity or meaningless, we just took a break for three weeks to focus on the crucifixion (Palm Sunday) and resurrection of Christ (Easter) and to give God praise and thanks for what he's done in the past year (One Year Anniversary Service).

The Preacher also sees in this world much injustice and he wrestles heavily with what he *observes* in this world versus what he *knows* about God in relation to this world and how to reconcile the two.

When's the last time you either saw something or read something that made you say, "That's not fair! That's not right!" How many of you have seen *The Hunger Games*?

As punishment for a previous rebellion against the Capitol in which a 13th district was destroyed, one boy and one girl between the ages of 12 and 18 from each district are selected by annual lottery to participate in the Hunger Games. This is an event in which the participants (or "tributes") must fight in an outdoor arena controlled by the Capitol, until only one individual remains.

- Is this fair?

Why is this passage relevant today? You live in an unjust world. Life is not fair. Good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people. Governments abuse authority. So do CEO's. How should you respond?

In this chapter, you'll find wisdom for how to live in an unjust world. We see this laid out in 8:1.

Read 8:1

- If you have wisdom, it is written all over your face, your face shines, in the same way that a fool's stupidity is written all over their face. A shining face here symbolizes graciousness.

Why is he so concerned with the pursuit of wisdom? Wisdom is important because it teaches you how to act in any particular situation. In our chapter today, wisdom is important so that you'll know how to act in the presence of an unjust king and in response to an unjust world.

The point: You should fear God, the righteous Judge, while living in an unjust world.

I. Act wisely in the face of unjust authority (8:1-9).

Overview of this section: Those who had to deal directly with kings required exceptional wisdom. You also need wisdom in knowing how to deal with those who are in authority over you (bosses, superiors, government, etc.). What complicates things here is that this king is an unjust king (8:9); he does whatever he pleases (8:3) and he is supreme (8:4). This shouldn't surprise us in light of 7:20 & 29. Kings are sinners like the rest of us and they abuse their authority. So how should you respond to an unjust authority?

1. Honor God (8:2).

Ultimate reason for obedience: “Because of God’s oath to him” or “Because of your oath to God.”

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom. 13:1).

God is the ultimate king to whom all kings are accountable. The king is subject to God and only by God do kings reign (Prov. 8:15-16: “By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; by me princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly.”). Those who give counsel to the king are obligated to help restrain the king from making foolish decisions. Yet, you shouldn’t exercise obedience if it would implicate you in an evil cause.

2. Consider the Consequences (8:3-5)

Optional translations: of 8:3

- “Be not hasty to go from his presence...” (ESV)
- “You should leave his presence...” or “Do not be terrified in his presence, leave!” (Preferred)
- Evil cause = bad idea, a suggestion that the king doesn’t like

Meaning: Once you have presented your advice to the king and he rejects it, don’t continue to push your idea because the king is all-powerful and he will do whatever he wants. It is not only fruitless to question the king, it is dangerous. The wise thing to do here is to never oppose the king because opposition could lead to bad personal consequences. Verse 5 suggests that those who obey the king will avoid unpleasant consequences.

3. Act Appropriately (8:6-8)

The wise counselor will find the proper time and just way for doing so.

- What’s just as important as what you say, is *when* you say it and *how* you say.
- ***Prov. 25:15: “With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone.”***

Experientially, the Preacher encounters a problem: “man’s trouble” (evil).

- The counter: knowing the proper time is beyond human ability (8:7). An important component of the wise person’s ability to make decisions is based upon an intuition concerning future results of a decision. But here such a possibility is denied.
- Further inability: we can’t control the wind, we can’t prevent death, we can’t get out of war, and evil cannot rescue you. You are so caught up on evil that you cannot liberate yourself.

What about tyranny and oppression? If the king is supreme and has absolute authority, if I choose to comply, won’t that result in continued injustice?

- Tyranny is a serious political problem. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. The Preacher is imagining a problem where injustice is ignored by those in power. Tyranny needs to be resisted, although Christians continue to disagree about the parameters of such resistance. It is not surprising that the next chapter deals with the problem of delayed judgment and injustice.

II. Fear God, the righteous Judge (8:10-17).

Traditional wisdom may teach us that there is a time and a place for judgment and justice but what if our experience contradicts this? The Preacher's experience teaches him that the wicked are not punished, and in fact, they even seem to prosper.

1. Dilemma #1: The wicked escape judgment (10-11)

- See footnote in ESV that affirms “forgotten” is in most manuscripts.
- In verse 10, the Preacher is referring to hypocrites, people who used to frequent the temple but it didn't change their life; they were full of wickedness. In his mind, these people should be ripe for judgment but as far as the Preacher can see, there will never be a time for such a judgment. Judgment never came while they were alive and now they've been forgotten.
- Why is this so troubling? It encourages evil (8:11). If people do not observe negative consequences for bad actions, they will be encouraged to do even more evil.

2. Dilemma #2: The wicked prosper (12a, 14)

- See Eccl. 7:15 – this thought isn't new in this book
- A long life was thought to be a result of God's blessing.
 - *“My son, do not forget my teaching but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you” (Prov. 3:1-2).*
 - *Speaking of wisdom, “Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor” (Prov. 3:16).*
- The main line of thinking: no one gets what they deserve. The righteous do not get rewarded, they get punished. The wicked do not get punished, they get rewarded. This situation is meaningless. The righteous should die old and the wicked die young.
- Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do good things happen to bad people?
- Moral effort may pay no dividends at all. This is vanity.
- The GOSPEL: the greatest injustice ever witnessed is displayed in the gospel. Jesus was righteous and yet he was treated like the wicked so that we, the wicked, might become righteous.

3. Solution: Fear God, the righteous Judge (12b-13, 15)

- The struggle of the Preacher is over what he *knows* versus what he *observes*. He knows that there is judgment in the end, but that is the farthest thing from what he observes (see also 3:17). The story of Scripture teaches us that the judgment will not be delayed forever. In the end, the right thing will be done in every case.

“And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27).

“And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:12-15).

- Just because God has delayed judgment doesn't diminish the certainty of it. Temporal patience does not eliminate eternal judgment. In fact, the reason that God is being patient

and delaying judgment is so that many would turn to him while there is still time to find forgiveness and salvation.

“Do you suppose, O man...that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Rom. 2:3-4).

“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

“And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb. 9:27-28).

RESPOND: 1) Admit your need. 2) Ask God to forgive you and help you turn from sin. 3) Trust in Jesus alone to rescue you. 4) Follow Jesus, the King of your life, in faith from this day forward.

- The relevance of Ecclesiastes: The time between the coming of Christ and the consummation of the kingdom, delayed judgment will remain an agonizing problem (there’s no easy solution). By *faith* we believe that the day of judgment will come and that justice will finally be done.

“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:19-21).

- It could be really easy to become so obsessed with attempting to unravel the mystery of the wicked receiving the blessings of the righteous that we fail to enjoy God’s good gifts in life. This is another *carpe diem* passage (see 3:12-13; 5:18). One can only enjoy God’s good gifts in life once they’ve come to experience the greatest gift, a relationship with him through Jesus Christ.

Conclusion (8:16-17)

16 When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep, 17 then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

- The Preacher concludes this section with a tone of skepticism: no one can really figure out what God is up to in the universe. The problem is that no matter how exhaustively his epistemology is applied it fails to yield the desired results. No one can comprehend the meaning of work and life. The wise person may say he does, but this is simply untrue – he doesn’t.
- His autonomous epistemology is problematic. He claims to have seen “all the work of God,” but has he really seen “all” the work of God? Not only that, is he even capable of seeing “all” the work of God? NO! The “works of God” are not confined to what the

- Preacher can observe. There are some things that he will never know unless someone reveals them to him: creation and redemption.
- The answer to the Preacher's frustration is divine revelation.

The Hunger Games revisited: When the lottery is taken, do you know who's name is drawn from district 12? Primrose Everdeen, a 12 year old girl with blonde hair and blue eyes. She is thoughtful, sweet, and somewhat delicate in spite of all that she has been through at a young age. There's no chance at all that she would ever win. So do you know what happens? Her sister, Katniss Everdeen volunteers to take her spot. Katniss is 16 years old, much more mature, skilled in hunting and picking plants in the woods. You'll have to see the movie to find out what happens, but why do I share this? You and I are just like Primrose. We don't have a chance at survival, at eternal life. If it's up to us, we are destined for eternal death. But, Jesus steps up and says, "I'll volunteer to take his place, to take his punishment." My question for you today: will you reject his sacrifice or will you embrace it as the greatest treasure of your life? He is your only hope.

Thoughts I might include:

- What does the world say is unjust?
 - The shooting of Trayvon Martin
 - The search for 2-year-old Caleigh Anne Harrison from Gloucester