

Ecclesiastes 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Ecclesiastes chapter 8. Who is like the wise, and who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed. I say, keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him. Be not hasty to go from his presence.

Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, What are you doing? Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it.

All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when men had power over man to his hurt. Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place, and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God. There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous.

I said that this also is vanity. And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun, but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun. 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, 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.

Much of Ecclesiastes chapter 8 concerns rule and the exercise of authority and judgment, and how these play into the vaporous character of life. The preacher also explores the temporary prosperity of the wicked.

[2 : 38] Wisdom transforms the wise. It makes their faces to shine, and relieves the frustration, anger, and tension that can harden a person's countenance. Here, as elsewhere in the wisdom literature, wisdom is not merely mental intelligence. It's closer to mastery of the art of living well. Service to the king comes with an oath to God. So the servants of the king must be careful to obey the king, not merely out of obedience to a legitimate earthly ruler, but also out of their concern not to take the name of the lord in vain, in swearing falsely. The power of the king means that the wise subordinate must be very prudent in his actions and speech before the king. Michael Fox suggests that the meaning of verse 3 is that the subordinate should leave the king's presence when his anger is aroused, rather than in his rendering, tarrying in a dangerous situation. However, he connects the counsel to that of chapter 10 verse 4, which makes a contrasting claim. If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offences to rest. Fox argues that we need to take these alongside each other, and follow the appropriate counsel in the appropriate situation. Daniel Fredericks, like the ESV, reads this as a warning not to leave the king's presence hastily, more in keeping with chapter 10 verse 4, suggesting that it might relate to leaving without being properly dismissed.

The authority of the king cannot be directly challenged. Questions such as, what are you doing, are also ruled out with respect to the lord's authority in Isaiah chapter 45 verse 9.

Obedience is the best defence a subordinate has in such a situation. The meaning of the end of verse 5 is not immediately clear, given the multiple possible meanings of the Hebrew expression.

Fox observes that it could refer to a time of doom, the time when the king will die and his rule come to an end. It could refer to a time of judgment, the time when the lord, as a higher judge, will call the king to account, a fact that means that the king's rule is not truly absolute. Or as Fox himself believes we should take it, to the time and right way. The prudent subordinate appreciates that direct confrontation with the king is pointless and counterproductive. Rather, shrewdness would support a more circumspect approach, which chooses the right time in the right way to approach and win over the king. This understanding of the expression might be supported by verse 6 which follows. Verse 6 also might refer to the doom that awaits all the unrighteous, even kings, teaching subordinates to bide their time and wait for the lord's judgment. We might perhaps think here of David, who while pursued by king Saul, stressed obedience to and honouring of the king who was trying to kill him, while also biding his time and not directly opposing Saul, confident that the lord would act in his cause in time. The inability of anyone to avoid the day of doom is underlined in verses 7 and 8. None of us, not even the most powerful king, can evade our deaths or determine our futures. No one can excuse themselves from the great mustering of death. No amount of wickedness, treachery, deceit and trickery can enable us to escape it. The preacher had considered all of this while closely observing a time during which a man in power used his power to harm others.

Frederick's remarks upon the way that this reveals the logic of the section. He writes, In a sense, verse 9b serves as the title for this section on wise administration, a time when one man rules tragically over another. It explains the reason for all of the topics discussed in chapter 8 verses 2-15. Unjust leadership puts wise subordinates in tough positions of servile compliance, verses 2-5, believes itself invincible, verse 8, winks at cultic hypocrisy, verse 10, allows the proliferation of evil, verse 11, and strains any faith in justice, verses 12-14.

[6 : 33] He writes later, A consolation comes in chapter 8 verse 10, however. In such cases of injustice, even when any public holiness is feigned by these oppressive or lax leaders, they will be buried like everyone else. Their life will be temporary, as will any memory or any respect for their deeds. Those residents of the city whom these leaders oppressed, and who witnessed their leaders' hypocrisy and local cultic observances, will fortunately be able to forget the leaders and their foolish leading. Sometimes the vaporous character of life is a comfort, and considering the vaporous character of oppressors and unjust rulers is one such occasion, those who are mindful of the fact that injustice is also a vapor, can exercise patience and maintain their righteousness in difficult times. One of the hallmarks of periods of injustice is the slowness of the execution of justice, which has an emboldening effect on the wicked. The wicked tend to be people given to immediate gratification, and one of the most effective deterrents for them is the speediness of punishment. However, in times of unjust rule, justice, if it comes at all, may only be wrung out of authorities through long and painful procedure, with incredible and indeed prohibitive expense, and the most stubborn and insistent petitioning. In such societies where, if justice shows up at all, it is very tardy, evil persons can start to believe that they are able to act with impunity. The preacher is confident that justice will finally be done, yet like much in the book of Ecclesiastes, this confidence requires living by faith in divine justice, in a vaporous situation where justice is most apparent in its absence. His statement about the towering of justice also raises unsettling questions about the towering of

God's own justice, questions that are taken up elsewhere in the scriptures. The wicked will finally be judged, but the cause of righteousness suffers the longer we have to wait for this to happen.

The cries of the righteous and oppressed, for God's vengeance, fill the time of waiting. Besides the existence of wicked people who do not seem to get their comeuppance and appear to prosper, there are righteous people who seem to suffer the fate of the wicked. We might think of someone like Job. The psalmist describes the struggle that he experienced in understanding the vaporous character of the seeming fortunes of the righteous and the wicked in Psalm 73 verses 12 to 18.

Behold, these are the wicked, always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. If I had said, I will speak thus, I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task. Until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I discern their end. Truly you set them in slippery places, you make them fall to ruin. Recognizing the vaporous character of existence helps to keep these things in perspective.

[9 : 30] Recognizing the limitations of human wisdom and understanding under the sun, and the short-lived and swiftly reversible nature of our fortunes here, will help us not to surrender to despair. Injustice can be felt very keenly, but it too will pass, disappearing like the vapor that it is.

Once again, the preacher returns to his now familiar encouragement to his hearers. Recognizing the vaporous character of life, and even of great injustice, we should practice joy in our toil, learning to find what delight we can in the lot appointed to us.

A question to consider. How might the preacher's counsel concerning the vaporousness of injustice help to explain aspects of the scriptural instruction concerning how we ought to relate to rulers and those in authority?