Ecclesiastes

Does Life Have Meaning?

Submitting to the King

Ecclesiastes 8:1-9

Ecclesiastes chapter eight begins by asking two questions. The first is: "who is like the wise?" The answer is that no one can compare favourably with the wise. The second question is asked: "who knows the interpretation of a thing?" Again it is the wise man who has the answers to the events of life. Even though we learned in the previous chapter that wisdom has limitations, the wise man does know and understand many things in this life that are hidden to the understanding of a foolish man.

The wisdom of the wise man causes his countenance to shine and removes the hardness from his face. This is to say that wisdom helps a man to experience a measure of satisfaction, calmness, and confidence. This is especially true as he approaches a king.

In verses 2-9 we learn about some of the proper and imprudent ways to interact with a king. Some commentators take the king to be God, while others believe the king refers to an earthly monarch. The actions of the follower of God will be the same since they are to obey both God and earthly governments (Romans 13:1-7).

Qoheleth urges obedience to the commands of the king because of "God's oath to him." If the king is God then the oath must refer to the covenant. If the king is a human leader then the oath comes from the necessity placed upon God's people to obey those in authority.

1. **List some reasons why God's people are to obey their earthly leaders. (Read also Romans 13:1-7)**

Going from the king's presence in verse 3 refers to refusing to pay allegiance to the king. A wise man will not rebel against his leader because the king has the authority to do whatever he wants and act however he chooses. No subject has the right to question the decisions of a king. Therefore a wise man will follow the commands of the king and even if the king acts with evil he will know the time and nature of the actions he should take. He knows that God will make the final judgments so the wise man can remain calm and obedient even in the face of injustice.

2. **Why is it wise to follow the commands of the king?**

In verse 6, we read there is a time and way for everything. God will right all wrongs though man may have to wait to see his justice. Rebelling against authority, even unjust authority, can bring many troubles on a man. The wise man waits for justice, not knowing when God will act, but trusting that he will.

In verse 8, Qoheleth lists four things over which man has no control. First, he cannot retain the spirit.[1] Death will bring the departure of the spirit from the body and not even an king has the power to hold his spirit in his body. Second and similarly, man has no power over the day of his death. Third, death is like a soldier in battle, he cannot remove himself from fighting while the war rages. Fourth, no one can gain control and escape judgment through wickedness.

3. **How does an understanding of verse 8 help a wise man obey the king even in the face of adversity?**

Even though man cannot restrain the spirit or avoid death, he does have the power to hurt others. This is especially true in the case of a king or governmental leader. In verse 9 we see the familiar phrase, "under the sun" indicating these actions were taken by man without consideration of God.

Wisdom in Fearing God

Ecclesiastes 8:10-17

There is nothing that escapes the sight of God who knows even the intents of the heart (Jeremiah 17:10). The wicked in verse 10 gave the appearance of faithfulness. They went in and out of the temple and were praised[2] and given a proper burial even when they had practiced evil. Solomon probably has in mind the wicked kings who would not escape punishment, but it is equally true of any evil person. This is vanity (hebel) which tells us that every person, even kings, will be forgotten after death.

Qoheleth repeats a theme found in the previous chapter that it can appear that the wicked prosper and live long lives without any retribution from God. The wise man should know that this will not go on indefinitely and that the evil man will be punished. God does not always act according to the timetables humans might consider appropriate, but God will always execute justice on the wicked and will vindicate the righteous.

The perceived slowness of God's execution of justice causes the sinner to increase in his sin. The wicked man who seems to have "gotten away" with wickedness is emboldened to continue. Qoheleth wants his readers to "fear God" because that is the only path to rightness with God.

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[1] Some translations say that no man can restrain the wind. Either translation can be grammatically correct and it impossible to say with certainty which Solomon had in mind. No one can restrain the wind, just as no one can restrain the spirit leaving the body.

[2] The word translated "praised" in the ESV is translated as "forgotten" in some translations.

4. **Why does God sometimes delay in the execution of his justice?**

5. **How does God describe the relationship he has to those who fear him in verse 12**

6. **What negative words and phrases does Solomon use in verse 13 to describe the condition of the wicked.**

Verse 14 continues the thought that "on earth" or under the sun there is a vanity (hebel) which takes place where those who are righteous sometimes suffer as if they were wicked while the wicked sometimes prosper as if they were righteous. While this is not to be considered the "norm" it does happen.

The righteous man should not become embittered from what happens in life that seems unfair. Instead he should be joyful in his blessings. It is these simple blessings that bring joy: eating, and drinking, and working.[3] These are not hedonistic pleasures, but simple joys granted to man by God. He should relish God's blessings.

A man should not allow the circumstances around him that seem inequitable to rob him of joy. The fact is that the limits of human knowledge prevent man from ever understanding why life unravels as it does. He should fear God, placing his faith in the only one who has the power to right all wrongs and vindicate all who have been righteous.

Truth

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.

Ecc. 8:15

7. **How can man go about enjoying the simple pleasures of life without becoming embittered by what seems to be inequities around him?**

In verses 16-17 Solomon reaches an important conclusion. He had applied his heart so diligently to seek wisdom (1:16) that he had been unable to sleep.[4] In his great quest to understand what happens "under the sun" Qoheleth often came up empty handed. There are some happenings in this world simply beyond understanding even for the wisest of the wise no matter how intently they seek answers. No man can understand why God acts or does not act as he sometimes does. Those who claim to know the answers to all of life's mysteries are only fooling themselves.

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[3] See also 2:24; 3:12, 22; 5:18.

[4] The one who cannot find sleep can either be Solomon as he makes his search for wisdom or it can be translated to mean that those on earth do not sleep as they work and labour in the activities of life.

8. **What frustrations can develop when a person cannot be content to "not know" why God sometimes works as he does.**

For those who want to be wise as they live on this earth, Solomon has this advise in chapter 8. Obey your leaders, fear God and trust in Him to right all wrongs in his time, don't concern yourself with what you cannot understand, and enjoy the simple blessings that come from the hand of God.