

Eccl. 8:1-15, The Wise Man Overcomes Vanity
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A. Introduction

1. Evangelical Christianity has a widespread image of a Santa Clause God:
 - a) His main purpose in life is to do nice things for us.
 - b) Whether he does or not depends on how good we are.
 - c) Thus we can manipulate him for our benefit by our actions.

2. Qohelet seeks to disabuse us of this notion.
 - a) He agrees that God will bless the righteous.
 - b) But we do not see this in daily life, where it is often the case that the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer. Cf. the LJC as the greatest example!
 - c) "In the world you shall have tribulation," so far as tangible benefits are concerned.
 - d) Our expectations must be directed to spiritual benefits, or we shall surely be disappointed.

3. Today:
 - a) He confesses the benefits of wisdom,
 - b) Then illustrates its value in understanding two violations of the notion of a Santa-Clause God:
 - 1) The problem of a tyrannical political ruler;
 - 2) The generalization of this to the wicked and the righteous.
 - c)

8:1, wise & knows
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8:2-9, Wise 8:10-15, Knows

B. 8:1, The General Principle: The Benefits of Wisdom

Though wisdom is rare, and polluted by man's sin, yet it is exceedingly valuable, and worth seeking, for it enables us to confront the inevitable suffering of our world with joy and graciousness.

1. Its definition--not common. Something very rare.
 - a) The *wise man*, picked up in 2-9 (v.5). Begins with the fear of the Lord; comes as a special gift from the Lord (Solomon). Skill in living; applied knowledge of the Scriptures.
 - b) One who **knows** the interpretation of a thing, picked up in 10-14 (v.12). Here is the definition Qohelet wants us to keep in mind. The wise man knows what events really mean.

2. Its benefit--leads us away from two undesirable reactions that the vanity of life under the sun might otherwise impose on use:
 - a) Enlightens the face: *Joy* where the world expects sorrow. Remember, though Qohelet recognizes how rotten the world is, his conclusion is always the same--REJOICE.
 - b) Changes the boldness/strength of his face: *Gentleness* where the world expects harshness and antagonism.

C. 8:2-9 Applied to Earthly Rulers

The first focus is on the tyranny of a human ruler, and the *wise man's* realization that there is another, heavenly ruler.

1. The King's Authority

Two commands to obey the king, each associated with a different motive, one heavenly, the other earthly.

a) v.2, the heavenly motive.

- 1) Command: Obey the king's explicit commands.
- 2) Motive: The Oath of God. Refers to God's enforcement of human promises. Not an oath to God, but an oath made before God and guaranteed by him. God watches over our human contracts; if we violate them, we displease him.

b) v.3-4, the earthly motive.

- 1) Command: Please him beyond explicit commands; do not hasten away from him; don't be associated with anything that might cause him displeasure. Guards us against a legalistic notion of submission to authority--"I didn't disobey any explicit command." No, but did you really try to please?
- 2) Motive: The king's wrath.
 - a> He does whatever he pleases.
 - b> His word is powerful.
 - c> No one can challenge his authority. Posed as a rhetorical question, but the next section effectively turns it into a real question, and answers, "God can."

2. Another authority

The wise man realizes that "time and judgment" is coming--perhaps hendiadys for "time for judgment". Then we have two lists of four reasons each, showing how defenseless the king really is before God.

a) Payday someday. Here is the evaluation made by the wise man. 5a is a surprise: at first, seems to be talking about the command of the king, but as we read on, we realize that there is another King involved in the background.

b) Four reasons with KIY: (8:6,7 consist of four clauses, each introduced by "for". Replace KJV "because" and "therefore" in 6 with "for.")

- 1) God will judge every purpose, cf. 12:14.
- 2) Man's wickedness is great upon him, evident, visible, like a man trying to smuggle a grandfather clock out of a store under his overcoat.
- 3) He himself does not know what is coming.
- 4) No one can tell him about the future.

c) Four negative statements showing the king's weakness in the face of death. More specific focus of the weakness in the four "for"s.

- 1) No man can retain his own spirit, i.e., postpone death.
- 2) No one can be triumphant in the day of death.

- 3) Nor can one get a furlough from that war. No such thing as R&R in the struggle with death. You are trapped into the conflict, and cannot escape.
- 4) Wickedness, which has served him so well in life, is powerless to aid him in death.

3. Summary, v.9. This is his experience in observing those who oppress others.

D. 8:10-14, Applied to Events in General

Now we move from the despot to the more general case of wickedness in daily life, which so often differs from our "Sunday School" view. This section is structured chiastically, with the observations of daily life on the outside, and the perspective of the one who *knows* on the inside.

1. 10-12a, The first perversion section.

- a) 10, Reversal: the wicked prosper, and the righteous suffer, contrary to expectation.
- b) 11,12a. The reason: Judgment is deferred, so men are bold in their wickedness. Cf. Isa. 26:9,10; Rom. 2:4,5. The very goodness of God, giving sinners time to repent, encourages them to persist in sin.

2. 12b-13, The wise man's perspective. Here he is called "he who fears God," echoed in the reason assigned to each fate.

- a) The foundation: Not "I have seen," but "I know."
 - 1) Reflects second half of 8:1a, one who "knows the interpretation of a matter."
 - 2) This position cannot be obtained by observation or reason. It is only accessible through revelation. Only the believer can see that God cares for his own.
- b) Lot of the righteous and wicked: as expected, in both cases related to their fear of God (or lack thereof).

3. 14, Back to the reversal. The wicked and the righteous often share one another's fate; this is an element of the vanity that pervades our world.

E. 8:15, The Solution.

1. Be happy in the simple things of life (eating and drinking; daily life). Food and raiment is all we are to need for contentment (1 Tim. 6:8). There can be no assurance of anything more, and to presume that God must give us some special desire if only we are "good enough" is simply contrary to Scripture!

2. "That shall abide with him *in* his labor," not "of" his

labor. The theme continues to be that one cannot rely on labor to produce anything, and must find satisfaction in the daily ebb and flow of life.

3. That life is, after all, the gift of God.