

Ecclesiastes⁹ The Words of the Preacher

Lesson 5 Ecclesiastes Chapters 8 and 9

A Wise Man's Wisdom and Fallacies

Ecclesiastes 8:1 Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter? A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam.

With the beginning of chapter 8, Solomon discusses the fallacies he has discovered. A wise man's wisdom is deceiving. The text says, "Who is like the wise man...who knows the interpretation of a matter?" It is a difficult question. It is actually a setup question that leads to the next statement. The wise man's wisdom illuminates him but it is not the illumination of humanity. His words point inward, not outward. His wisdom causes his stern face to beam which means it is good only for him, not others. What a fallacy about life!

Keep the Commands of the King

Ecclesiastes 8:2 I say, "Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God. ³"Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases."

The truly wise man will "keep the command of the king." He may have an interpretation and understanding concerning a matter, but if it is in contradiction to the king, it is no good to anyone but himself. "Keep the command of the king" is the instruction and do not be quick to leave him. There are good kings and there are bad kings. In some kingdoms, the people must flee because of the wrath of the king. However, the instruction is "not to leave too quickly." In other words, make sure the king is truly up to no good before leaving. If the king becomes evil, do not join him in an evil matter. The king can do what he wishes when he wishes, and we may have to flee to keep from being forced by the king into committing an evil act. To Solomon, wisdom is good only for self and not for others. This thought is not held as a truth in the rest of the Scripture. Remember Joseph in Egypt? Each new ruler saw the wisdom of Joseph and put him in charge of most of his kingdom. Remember that Daniel also found favor in each new ruler's eye and was given authority not only over his people, but also over the Babylonians, the Medes and the Persians. They were different rulers from different dynasties with different languages, yet they all saw the wisdom of Daniel. True wisdom not only illuminates an individual; it also illuminates those around him. True wisdom spreads like wild fire through the forest to the masses. Even evil kings can see the need for a truly wise man. This statement is a fallacy.

A Proper Time

Ecclesiastes 8:4 Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, "What are you doing?" ⁵ He who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure. ⁶For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, when a man's trouble is heavy upon him.

In Solomon's day, no one could question the actions of the king who was an absolute ruler. Solomon knew this well for he was the king. He had the power over life and death of every soul in his kingdom in his hand. With

⁹ All Scriptures in this lesson entitled "The Ecclesiastes, the Words of the Preacher" are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE, Copyright (C) 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

one flick of the king's finger, a man could lose his life that day. Solomon also knew well that there was a proper time and a proper way to approach the king. Before Solomon was born, his father was approached by Nathan. It was done properly and at the proper time. I am sure the sin of David weighed heavily on Nathan when he was sent by the Lord to face the king. We, too, face all kinds of stress and heavy burdens because of governmental pressures. Solomon's conclusion is a good one. We should do things in the proper order and at the proper time when it comes to the king. However, the king is not God. He may control a man's fate on earth but not in eternity, and that shows the fallacy of Solomon's thoughts.

No One Knows And No One Has Authority

Ecclesiastes 8:7 If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen? ⁸ No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge in the time of war, and evil will not deliver those who practice it. ⁹ All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over *another* man to his hurt.

Solomon stopped describing the fallacies of the king and the plight of man. Today we would say that no one has the ability to see the future and we cannot know the events of tomorrow. Nevertheless, with God man can know the future. Throughout the period of the revelation of God to man, God has told man the future through the Scripture. However, man without God has no clue to the future.

In the same way, man has no authority or power over the elements of nature. Only God controls these things. Kings can do as they wish but they cannot control God or the works of His hand. Those who practice evil are never protected by their own evil practices.

The Authority of One Man Over Another

Ecclesiastes 8:10 So then, I have seen the wicked buried, those who used to go in and out from the holy place, and they are soon forgotten in the city where they did thus. This too is futility. ¹¹ Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil.

There are wise men, kings and authorities, and Solomon has seen them all. He has seen the authority of one man over another to the harm of the one being oppressed. He has seen the wicked die and placed in the ground. Who were these wicked men? They were the same ones he saw going in and out of the holy place. Yes, the wicked seek religion too, but they use it for ill purposes. It is the fallacy of being Godless in God's realm. The wicked want to continue in their sin and do as they wish and yet they still have a desire for their eternal souls to be safe. Evil kings have been the masters of this tactic. We see their faults because everything they do is so public. In reality, all of us have been guilty of similar sins. A wicked and evil person is not soon forgotten as the text states. In the span of eternity, that is true, but the few generations that follow a wicked man's dealings and death dare not forget the pain placed on them and their family. We have not forgotten the evils of the tyrant of WWII and we will not soon forget the evils of the tyrants who masterminded the Twin Tower destruction in New York, nor the flight into the Pentagon. Generations to come will remember. Solomon concludes that this knowledge is meaningless is man's view. Those who put their trust in God remember the sins of the past and dare not become like the evil men who do as they please.

Judgment Comes Slow on Sinners

Ecclesiastes 8:12 Although a sinner does evil a hundred *times* and may lengthen his *life*, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly. ¹³ But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God.

Solomon makes his point that judgment comes slowly for sinners. Hundreds and hundreds of times they commit evil deeds and it seems that they never get caught. Finally, when judgment comes, it seems "too little, too late." Once again, the writer contradicts his own theology by stating that the evil person can extend his life with his evil acts, but it is not so. In our earthly thinking, we often feel that judgment comes too late, that we can extend our lives by doing evil or can we shorten our lives by doing good. Additionally, Solomon brings God into the picture. The person who has a relationship with God will do well whether it is in this life or the next. Eternal life for the Godly is secure and blessed. It is God's message, not man's.

Good for the Bad and Bad for the Good

Ecclesiastes 8:14 There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility.

Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do good things seem to happen to bad people? Solomon sees this dilemma and uses it to show the futility of life. The answer to the two questions usually deals with choices. Some wicked people make wise and calculated choices that allow good things to come to them here on earth. The problem is that things on earth are only temporary. Eternity will deal them the final blow. On the other hand, good people often make poor choices. Thus, their temporal blessings are few but their eternal blessing will be a great reward. Nevertheless, bad and good things happen that are not related to choices. People get sick. Today, we know about cancer. In Solomon's day, it was not even a consideration. They did not know about kidney failure, heart attacks, blocked arteries, liver disease or a ruptured appendix. They had ointments for boils and herbal concoctions for fever and other ailments, but they did not have the knowledge of what was happening internally. Today, we can prove that a person's brain is misfiring. In Solomon's day, they just thought they had lost their minds. Neither whatever they thought it was nor what we know about it today changes the fact that a person has a brain problem. We do not know the answers to these questions, but God knows. There is a reason. There is a purpose. Nevertheless, in the worldly mind of Solomon, it is all meaningless.

Eat, Drink and Be Merry

Ecclesiastes 8:15 So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils *throughout* the days of his life which God has given him under the sun. ¹⁶When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), ¹⁷and I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover.

All of Solomon's earthly thinking has only led him back to his same conclusion, "eat, drink, and be merry" for nothing has meaning. Good happens to the bad, bad happens to the good and it cannot be changed. Nevertheless, food, drink, and merriment can get us through it all. Man cannot understand or know the ways of God, so why bother. Life is meaningless in Solomon's mind, a fallacy in his long study of wisdom under the sun.

Make no mistake. Man can discover the ways of God. God has revealed His ways to man; therefore, man is without excuse. God is communicating with man through the words of the Bible, the creation in which he lives and testimonies of the changed lives of people who belong to God. It is man who does not want to communicate with God except when he has no other place to turn.

In the Hands of God

Ecclesiastes 9:1 For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether *it will* be love or hatred; anything awaits him.

Solomon then concludes that the deeds of the righteous wise man are in the hands of God. Furthermore, he sadly assumes that both the righteous and wise man do not know whether or not God will approve or disapprove of their deeds. It seems possible to Solomon that God's choice could be good or bad depending on His whim at the time and man has no say in the decision. The choices man has made throughout his life has no effect on God's ultimate approval or disapproval. It is a sad commentary on how man thinks about God.

The Same for All - It is an Evil

Ecclesiastes 9:2 It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean, and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear.³ This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men. Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil, and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they go to the dead.⁴ For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion.⁵ For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten.⁶ Indeed their love, their hate, and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun.

Solomon says the same fate awaits everyone and he concludes that there is no different place for the good versus the bad; they all go to one place, the grave! To Solomon, only in living is there hope for when a person dies, all will die; then there is nothing. All is forgotten at death! All perish in death! When death comes, Solomon says, their time under the sun is done away with. It is over! There is nothing after death.

Once again - Eat Drink and Be Merry

Ecclesiastes 9:7 Go *then*, eat your bread in happiness, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works.⁸ Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head.⁹ Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life, and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun.

God's approval of our work occurs in our lives here on earth and that is the end of our reward. Once again, Solomon says eat, drink and be merry during this life for this life is the only reward. Enjoy the woman in this short and fast life, for that, too, is the reward. We might as well enjoy it because when this life is gone, there is nothing else.

Sheol - The Grave

Ecclesiastes 9:10 Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do *it* with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.¹¹ I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise, nor wealth to the discerning, nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all.¹² Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net, and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them.

We might as well do our while we are here on earth because when we go to Sheol, nothing continues there for us. Sheol is the place of the dead in the Old Testament Hebrew language and is the same as the Greek Hades of the New Testament. In Solomon's theology of death, nothing happens in Sheol/Hades. It is just a grave. Furthermore, man has no choice in what will happen to him because everything happens by chance in Solomon's mind. Man will be like the fish caught in the net; he, too, will come upon evil and it will suddenly fall on him.

The Wisdom of the Poor is Despised

Ecclesiastes 9:13 Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me. ¹⁴ There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it, and constructed large siegeworks against it. ¹⁵ But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man. ¹⁶ So I said, " Wisdom is better than strength." But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded. ¹⁷ The words of the wise heard in quietness are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. ¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

Solomon gives an example of a poor man who saves a city from destruction but is quickly forgotten. How is it that a poor man can save a city through the small wisdom that he possesses but the wisdom of this same poor man is rarely heeded in all other circumstances? Why? Because he is poor! It ought not to be this way but Solomon has watched it happen enough that he concludes that that is how life works. He has also seen that the shout among fools has been heard more often than the wise council given in the quiet. Shouting should rarely be the answer in any situation and yet it occurs more often than in circumstances where calmer heads should prevail and all possibilities should be put on the table for consideration so that the best choice can be made. Yet for Solomon, the screaming sinner and the fool destroy all the good that has been done.