

Rulers & Reality

Ecclesiastes 8:2-15

We have to look beyond appearances to understand prosperity, poverty, people, and now power. Rulers are a subset of mysterious mankind so king Solomon provides wisdom for dealing with those who have power.

The Map

- I. 1:1-2:26 Satisfaction cannot be found in a vaporous world. Only God can give it.
- II. 3:1-5:20 God is sovereign over all despite grief and hardship.
- III. 6:1-8:15 Look beyond appearances in order to understand and live wisely.
 - i. 6:1-12 Prosperity is not always a blessing.
 - ii. 7:1-15 Adversity is not necessarily an evil.
 - iii. 7:16-8:1 Be wise in understanding people.
 - iv. 8:2-15 Deal wisely with rulers, seek justice, and rejoice before God.
- IV. 8:16-12:14 Last, Solomon addresses challenges and difficulties, and the need to seek wisdom and live joyfully despite them. This is the gift of God.

People in Power

Solomon knows that corrupt, foolish, or just mistaken kings sometimes issue unwise decrees and commands—not the kind you would if you were in charge. In that situation, do what he says because of your oath to God (v. 2). Oaths are lawful and good when done for solemn duties and occasions. Jesus says not to take them lightly, and He takes one at His trial (Matt. 5:34; 26:63-64). The oath in verse two is to God, swearing to serve the king, and not only to serve him when you agree with him (cf. Ex. 20:12). Don't run out of his presence when he doesn't receive your counsel or vote your way (v. 3). No one can stop him or call him to account. Choosing your battles wisely, knowing when to persuade and when to be quiet, being faithful in service to others as an act of ultimate devotion to God is an art of wisdom and faithfulness. Solomon isn't endorsing spineless compromise. He knew how to expose evil (1 Kgs. 3:27-28). Simplistic people think in terms of white hats and black hats: all people in this party are good, and all those are bad. Tell me how they voted, where they work, where they live, what denomination, and so on and I'll tell you all about them. Well, this one guy worked for the worst king in Israel who was famous for murder, theft, and marrying a pagan priestess who instituted the worship Baal and Asherah. Yet he saved a hundred prophets. That would be Obadiah working for Ahab and Jezebel, living faithfully in fear for his life (1 Kgs. 18:3-4, 12-13). Being inflexible, proud, unwise, and lacking in a sense of proportion might be a mask for cowardice. Running away is harder than dealing with opposition and doing the hard work of thinking and praying about the next right step. The wise must have both timing and judgment, and this may require suffering in the meantime (vv. 4-5). There's no way to predict the future and avoid pain (v. 6). No counsellor can tell the king what's going to happen when, and death is coming for us all which ought to be great motivation to stand against sin (vv. 7-8). Instead, people lie, cheat, steal, con, pretend, and exaggerate in order to escape the inescapable. Knowing this is the case, serve those God has put above you and honor those under your authority. Your boss is wrong sometimes just like you. Your elders are fallible. Your parents have blind spots. Your children imitate *you*. Apply Solomon's advice to yourself as an employee, son or daughter, husband or wife, friend, parent, grandparent, student and member of the body of Christ.

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Corruptible Power

As Solomon applied his heart to every work done under the sun, he found policies put into place that hurt those who make them (v. 9). Of course officials make policies that line their own pockets, but what about when they ruin the cities they themselves live in? Lord Acton said, “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” People who compromise with or pursue sin for their own benefit are unknowingly tearing themselves apart and it’s only a matter of time before it comes to light: “So are the ways of everyone who is greedy for gain; it takes away the life of its owners” (Prov. 1:19). Solomon also saw the wicked rulers who had trashed the “place of holiness” be forgotten in the cities they wrecked, ensuring folly would be repeated (v. 10). The answer to this isn’t complicated. If sentences against crime are not speedily executed, the hearts of the sons of men will be fully set to do evil (v. 11). Solomon’s language is striking. Paul describes the state as God’s minister for good to those who do good, and for punishment for those who do evil (Rom. 13:4). Just as a father disciplines the son he loves, preventing him from continuing in sin (Prov. 13:24), so the state should play its role in bringing swift justice before the hearts of men are fully set on evil. To refuse to do so is a species of hatred regardless of stated intentions (19:18). Sons of men without city fathers chase evil. This verse is not only or even directly about swift justice, but our folly in response to slow justice. Sometimes the evildoer gets away with it a hundred times and lives to old age, losing his mind while still in power, but this doesn’t change the blessing upon those who fear God (v. 12). It can look like everything goes well with the wicked but remember that things aren’t as they appear on the surface. Having a lot is different than enjoying what you have. We see it when there’s one little kid playing contentedly with a stick in the dirt, full of imagination and adventure, while another kid surrounded by toys can’t be happy. The fear of God is mentioned three times in verses 12-13. It’s the gift of God to understand that it goes well for the one who fears God, and that the wicked isn’t really prolonging his days in any advantageous ways (v. 13). Would you rather have a short life full of evil deeds to answer God for, or a long one filled with more of them? No one ever gets away with anything. We will all stand before the judgment seat of God where perfect justice and everlasting mercy will be meted out. The one who fears the Lord will never lack His blessing.

Enduring Joy

It’s a vaporous world where just men suffer the fate of the wicked and the wicked receive the blessing; again, the Preacher says, vapor (v. 14). People read Ecclesiastes in Solomon’s time who had suffered this just as there are those right now. The flesh wants to lash out, to curse and scowl and break stuff. But the Holy Spirit leads us to respond rather than react: “So I commended enjoyment, because a man has nothing better under the sun than to eat, drink, and be merry; for this will remain with him in his labor all the days of his life which God gives him under the sun” (v. 15). No amount of money, health, status, position, power or prestige can touch the joy of Christ. This “will remain with him.” Even in affliction, we are “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10). In 100 years, where will the foolish ruler and his counter-productive policies be? Gone forever. And where will your joy be? Right where it is now, in Christ.