

Ecclesiastes 8 – Wisdom in the court of the foolish king

What does it say on your passport? Which national soccer / rugby jersey do you pull on? Do you let that define your identity? We even do the same with badges of denomination.

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” John Dalberg-Acton

“The greatest happiness is to vanquish your enemies, to chase them before you, to rob them of their wealth, to see those dear to them bathed in tears, to clasp to your bosom their wives and daughters.” Genghis Kahn. Universal ruler / Divine emperor

The Preacher is going to tell us of this.

Or do you let your faith, and citizenship of heaven, define it?

Pray

8:12 I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him

Respect, awe, and submission to the LORD rather than the flag, the nation's leaders.

Who is like the wise? (v. 1)

8:1a Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

A couple of things to note. No-one is truly wise (see 14-17) – cannot see God's ways. In terms of human wisdom – interpretation c.f. Joseph; Daniel interpretation. What is being interpreted here?

8:1b A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.

Behaviour at the royal court – a glowering countenance (7:3 which makes the heart glad) could bring trouble. Who would choose to argue face-to-face with a despot? The proverb speaks of how things are made to appear, not how they actually are.

Keep the King's Command (vv. 2-12a)

Ecclesiastes 8 – Wisdom in the court of the foolish king

“I” – the personal advice of the Preacher. The command of the king is to be obeyed. The wise man will not always agree (v. 4 – “what are you doing?”). Timing and judgement in his actions are crucial. The oath is either an utterance on the seriousness of the situation; or a prior pledge of allegiance to the king before God. Either way – wise man will think before directly opposing the foolish king.

5:2 Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.

7:9 Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools.

Here – flaunting wisdom may bring harm (v. 5). And the wise man is to withdraw from the royal court (v. 3b). We have no control (v. 8) – to delay the day of our death; to be excused from the army when the war begins; **to avoid the time that the pandemic breaks out**. Wickedness will not allow those who practice / master / own it to escape. Normally expect the owner to prevent the slave’s escape, not the other way round.

The wise man is to know the proper time and place for everything (6; ch. 3:16-16)

3:16-17 Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work.

5, 6 Exercise true patience rather than let the foolish ruler know his true feelings. 3,6 The wise man should know this in his heart. The recognition of what is good and just will sustain him. It will prevail. Even through the time when man exercises hurt over man. It falls on the king’s victims and on himself. To the point he is eventually forgotten (9, 10). 10b – Futility – meaninglessness.

Not many of us go into a royal court / parliament. But we are all citizens in this world. Outspoken prophet like Daniel – limits on subservience

Ecclesiastes 8 – Wisdom in the court of the foolish king

Acts 5:29 Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings!

Not because you don't like something – like the speed limit; or the advice to stay home and stay apart. But if it goes against God's word.

1 Peter 2:13-17 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor.

Pray for wisdom for our leaders. Pray that they act in Godly ways. Times when we need to stand up for God wisely, not covering up for evil, but not rashly and not in anger. Example – we carefully considered responses to referenda.

Fear God (vv. 12-17)

There is a consequence to the divine patience God shows mankind – justice is not swift in our eyes. And there is a perfect king.

How does The Preacher see divine judgement playing out?

For those who respond to the LORD – v. 12

John 1:12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Jesus & God will rule in perfection – not like the foolish king. We will not need wisdom to deal with their rule – just offer praise and worship.

Hebrews 4:15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

King of Kings, Lord of Lords – Rev 17/ Rev 19

Ecclesiastes 8 – Wisdom in the court of the foolish king

But for those who don't – v. 13. Eternal separation from God & all He stands for.

Implies a time outside of time – a time when the LORD will bring his justice

2 Peter 3:8 But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.

There is a life – not just the life under the sun. An eternal life on offer.

And until we receive that, The Preacher urges us to get on with this life (v 15). The details of when Jesus will return, God's righteousness fully revealed we don't need to fully understand now. We can't. It's beyond the limits of our wisdom. The Preacher does not doubt the ultimate justice of God, but neither does he claim to understand how it will work. Do not sacrifice living well before God in pursuit of a wisdom, an understanding we cannot gain.

We have to know the limits of what our country can do for us. Do not put our faith in our flag, our rulers, our eminent businessmen to save us for eternity. Because we will face, at times, foolish kings. That's where God, Jesus come in. God is other – and outside our full comprehension. We can't co-opt Him onto our national sports team, our national crusades, our national way of life. We have to switch that around and carry our passports for His kingdom first. We live in a particular context, but we must come to terms with it not being our home. A home where there will be no more tears, sickness, sin, death.

Hebrews 11:13-16 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.