

Death & Despots

Ecclesiastes 8:1-15 October 23, 2024

In 1976, Mao Zedong stepped into eternity. This man responsible for about 80 million deaths was honored with an immense state funeral.¹ The Politburo demanded that his body be permanently preserved. While he lay in state, a million people came to see him and pay him respects.²

Above his crystal casket was a banner that read, "Carry on the cause left by Chairman Mao and carry on the cause of proletarian revolution to the end." Sadly, his cause has been carried on. His legacy of oppression continues almost 50 years later, where he's still called China's "eternal father."³

Realities like that bother us. Why should a man like that get honor while countless thousands starve to death just outside the door? That sort of injustice bothered the Teacher, too.

He has talked about our daily lives, our goals, our family relationships, our religious behavior. But what about our relationship to the government? That's one of his focuses tonight. The Teacher recognizes that sometimes government acts in a good way, but sometimes it acts in very bad ways. As we've seen before when he talked about judges and courts: Sometimes the people who are supposed to uphold justice are the very ones who multiply *injustice* in the world.

So, how should we relate to human government? What should we do when governments are unrighteous? What does wisdom dictate? The Teacher has thoughts.

Ecclesiastes 8:1 - Who is like the wise person, and who knows the interpretation of a matter? A person's wisdom brightens his face, and the sternness of his face is changed.

The Teacher has just said that only one in a thousand people have *real* wisdom he's searching for. But we know *any* of us can be that person if we will believe God and fear Him and go His way. When we do, heaven's wisdom is a *gift* given to us to help us navigate life and please the Lord.

Whose face is the Teacher talking about here? Depending on how you read these verses, it could be *our* face or *God's* face or a human *king's* face.

The truth is, it can apply to all three. When we believe God and follow Him, we *please* Him. His face shines upon us as His grace flows into our lives. Wise speech and action will also help us in our relationships with earthly authorities. If you're the kind of person who speaks knowledgeably and can solve problems, generally you will find yourself in the good graces of your boss, your supervisor, your commander, or other authorities.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mao_Zedong

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_and_state_funeral_of_Mao_Zedong

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2012/11/06/world/asia/china-mao-legacy-grant/index.html>

But God's wisdom doesn't only change how other people perceive you. It actually transforms a person from the inside out. We heard about this in our study of Ezekiel this past Sunday. God's people, going God's way are - by definition - a *transformed* people. Visibly identifiable.

There are many people out there who are savvy, or smart, or successful. Are they *transformed*? Are we? Is the power of God *at work* in us as we walk with the Lord?⁴

Ecclesiastes 8:2 - ²Keep the king's command because of your oath made before God.

The Teacher is finally coming out of the depression he's been in for a few passages.⁵ He sees that there *is* an advantage to wisdom. Whether he means human wisdom or God's wisdom, either way, it's better to live with them than without them.

He starts to talk about a person serving in the court of the king. We can apply it at the level of government or military or in other areas where there is authority over us.

The Teacher says, "Keep the king's command." Obey the government. Naturally and culturally we think, "Well, sure, *if* the command is good." But the Teacher doesn't add any qualifiers. In fact, by the end of this section, the Teacher is thinking *more* of an oppressive dictator than a King David.

Some commentators suggest that he *really* means God, not the earthly kings we're under. But that really doesn't line up with the rest of his description.

The primary question at this point is *not* whether the king *deserves* to be obeyed. The primary question is: Do we *believe* that government is ordained by God? Do we *believe* Romans 13? Do we *believe* Titus 3:1, which tells us to submit to rulers and authorities? Do we *believe* 1 Peter 2:16-17, which says, "Submit as free people...honor the emperor?" Do we believe God is *right*?

The truth is, we are a *rebel* people. Rebels by nature, rebels by culture. We come to the table in the default mode of revolution and resistance and self-governance. Now, let me say that I love our country. I think the American system has led to a great decrease in autocratic oppression on a global scale for hundreds of years. Liberty and democracy are very good things.

And let me *also* say that the Bible does not command blind or absolute obedience to earthly authorities. The book of Daniel is a treatise on Godly civic disobedience. The apostles, too, famously stood before the supreme court of Israel and said, "We're going to obey God, not *you*."⁶

But the Bible is clear that the *default* position of a believer is to be peaceable, civic obedience *even to ungodly governments*. In God's Word, the carve outs for disobedience are never for comfort or

⁴ Ephesians 3:20

⁵ Frank Gaebelien, Willem VanGemern, Allen Ross, J. Stafford Wright, and Dennis Kinlaw. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 5: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

⁶ Acts 5:29

for prosperity or for our *opinions*. The only time civic disobedience is sanctioned by the Bible is when human authorities demand that God's people disobey God's specific commands.

Daniel served *joyfully* and *faithfully* in the court of Babylon for *decades*. He followed their rules, he enforced their laws, he supported their kings *except* when they demanded that he break *specific* commands of God. Even then, he did not resort to violence or revolution. He did not stage a coup. He simply said, "I *won't* do that." And then he waited around for the consequences.

Ecclesiastes 8:3-4 - ³ Do not be in a hurry; leave his presence, and don't persist in a bad cause, since he will do whatever he wants. ⁴ For the king's word is authoritative, and who can say to him, "What are you doing?"

We shouldn't be a people who huff and puff. "Unending vexation is pointless."⁷ The New Living Translation shows another layer. It says, "Don't try to avoid doing your duty."

At this point I find myself thinking, "Well, a republic is different. The system exists for me to get what I want." Ok. That's not always wrong. But remember what Peter said: "Submit as *free people*." They *weren't* free in the Roman Empire. Peter says, "Act like you're free and submit to the state as a testimony of God's grace and peace." Show the world that you're just passing through.

But the king is corrupt! Or, my boss is an idiot! Or, I know more than the board of directors! Ok. That may be true, too. But here's a question for us: If I'm unwilling to submit to an earthly king, what makes me think my heart will be willing to submit to my *heavenly* King? Again, that doesn't mean we do things that are evil. But a lot of things we don't want to obey aren't actually about good and evil, they're about my wants and comforts. They're about *my* will, not *God's* will.

When faced with a ruler that is doing something we don't like, don't be hasty to turn your back in rebellion. As one commentator writes, "*When suffering oppression at home or at work or in society, do not let the desire for revenge turn your heart to ungodliness.*"⁸

Ecclesiastes 8:5-7 - ⁵ The one who keeps a command will not experience anything harmful, and a wise heart knows the right time and procedure. ⁶ For every activity there is a right time and procedure, even though a person's troubles are heavy on him. ⁷ Yet no one knows what will happen because who can tell him what will happen?

Wisdom recognizes that human beings actually *need* governance. It would be nice if we didn't, but we *do*. What child doesn't need a parent? Soldiers *need* commanders. Authority is *good* for us.

Now, human authorities are not perfect. In fact, they're often oppressive. But that doesn't mean we don't *need* authority. It doesn't mean we don't need to learn how to obey for our good and for the

⁷ Duane A. Garrett *The New American Commentary, Volume 14: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

⁸ Philip Ryken *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*

good of society. Let's remember what Hebrews 5 says about *Jesus*: That "*although He was the Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.*"⁹ Obviously, you and I *also* need to learn to obey.

Ecclesiastes 8:8 - ⁸No one has authority over the wind to restrain it, and there is no authority over the day of death; no one is discharged during battle, and wickedness will not allow those who practice it to escape.

This verse reminds us that even though we're so sure we know what every president and boss and quarterback *should* do, the reality is that there is a *ton* we don't know and more we cannot control. "I think the government should do this and not that." You might be right. Or there might be more going on that you haven't considered. But let's say you're right. Even still, you and I have obligations to our nation and government.

What are they? Well, obeying the laws. Paying taxes. Praying for our leaders. Living at peace with our neighbors. Being a shining example of Godliness. Working righteousness, which will exalt our nation. These are our Biblical obligations to *whatever* society we live in. Whether we're under Mao or Reagan, Stalin or Solomon. Specifics within our personal activity will change depending on which of those rulers we find ourselves, but the broad callings remain the same.

Ecclesiastes 8:9 - ⁹All this I have seen, applying my mind to all the work that is done under the sun, at a time when one person has authority over another to his harm.

The Teacher is thinking of a dictator who oppresses his people. But what a comfort that we can live with faithfulness and wisdom even under bad rulers because *most of history's rulers have been very bad!* But Christianity works in every time and in every place because God's truth and power remain the same yesterday, today, and forever!

But, if the rulers are oppressive, why not overthrow them? Why not destroy them? "Since God is slack in His promise, why not do God's job for Him?" We want justice as we see it. We want revenge for ourselves. And often we don't want to wait for the Lord to be our Avenger.

The Teacher says, "Violent disobedience to authority is not the answer." And then, to help us deal with the disappointment of injustice, he now pivots to say, "Chin up - Stalin will eventually die!"

Ecclesiastes 8:10 - ¹⁰In such circumstances, I saw the wicked buried. They came and went from the holy place, and they were praised in the city where they did those things. This too is futile.

There are six different ways this verse can be translated.¹⁰ Your version may say the wicked are forgotten, not praised. Others say the *righteous* are forgotten. The point is that this world often doesn't get it right. It's *hevel*.

⁹ Hebrews 5:8

¹⁰ Douglas Miller *Ecclesiastes*

But, the *evil* king eventually answers to the *King* of kings. Chairman Mao - that evil oppressor - died and stood before the Lord to face judgment. He was no longer a king or commander and he is going to be repaid for his wickedness for all eternity.

But what happened back on earth? This world is so spoiled by sin, so defined by *hevel* that people here were *crying* for Mao. *Honoring* him. Praising him. Burying him with great pomp.

He doesn't deserve that burial! He doesn't deserve that praise! You're right. He doesn't. But this is the world we live in. A *hevel* world. And our job is not to execute our wrath on the people around us. *Grace* is the way forward. In an absurd world, we can cling to our faith in the fact that God *will* make things right. Mao is getting what he deserves right now.

Ecclesiastes 8:11 - ¹¹ Because the sentence against an evil act is not carried out quickly, the heart of people is filled with the desire to commit evil.

This is a principle that we wish our government would take to heart. But, in the moment, it seems the Teacher is actually criticizing God, not human rulers.¹¹ As if he's saying, "God, why don't You wipe out these evil people so that people will stop being evil???"

Why doesn't He? Because of His *kindness*. Because He *loves* people like us and wants to save us from the punishment we deserve. That's the *heart* of God. When a person refuses God's offer, then He *will* be a Judge to them. But His heart is to be their Savior and Father and Friend.

But, knowing what kind of Person He is, we should never take advantage of God's mercy. We don't sin that grace may abound and we don't assume that mercy never expires. It does. For individuals, for nations, and ultimately for all mankind as God brings the history of *this* world to a conclusion.

Ecclesiastes 8:12 - ¹² Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, I also know that it will go well with God-fearing people, for they are reverent before him.

I had a great teacher in college named Richard Unruh. I took as many of his classes as I could. He taught political science classes. He was very careful to *never* reveal his own political opinions in class. Some people were convinced he was a red-blooded conservative, others said a flaming liberal. He was acting like the Teacher. But *every once in a while* his core beliefs would sneak out.

Out of nowhere, the Teacher talks with the afterlife in mind. It's uncharacteristic. Speaking of this sudden spiritual declaration Derek Kidner writes, "*the Teacher drops the veil of his secularism and shows a window into his true faith.*"¹²

¹¹ James Smith *The Wisdom Literature And Psalms*

¹² Derek Kidner *Ecclesiastes: A Time To Mourn And A Time To Dance*

For the first time, the Teacher hints that death is *not* the end. For those who fear the Lord, there is something absolutely good and just and right waiting for us. And, as one commentary points out, the Teacher presents this idea to us without any supporting evidence! It's all by faith.¹³ But his faith is comforting him in the midst of this unfair world. It's carrying him through the futility.

Ecclesiastes 8:13 - ¹³ However, it will not go well with the wicked, and they will not lengthen their days like a shadow, for they are not reverent before God.

Well, *when* will it go poorly for them? We've had a bunch of references to how they *seem* to get away with everything in this life. But, once *this* life ends, they don't get away with *anything*. God brings the bill due. He settles every score. Justice *is* done.

Ecclesiastes 8:14 - ¹⁴ There is a futility that is done on the earth: there are righteous people who get what the actions of the wicked deserve, and there are wicked people who get what the actions of the righteous deserve. I say that this too is futile.

If all my affections are tied to *this* world, I'm going to be disappointed. Because *hevel* defines this world. And God is working to save us from it. But even here, the word *hevel* gives us hope. Remember: *hevel* means vapor - a wisp of smoke. Something temporary and fading away. The unfairness of this world is a passing vapor that will soon be gone, replaced with the Kingdom of Perfect Righteousness that will never, ever end.

So, after this discussion about government and unfairness and death and despots, what's the bottom line? Are we just to grit our teeth and bear with the unrighteous unfairness of life?

Ecclesiastes 8:15 - ¹⁵ So I commended enjoyment because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat, drink, and enjoy himself, for this will accompany him in his labor during the days of his life that God gives him under the sun.

Six times the Teacher comes to this conclusion: Enjoy life. *Not* in the sense of "eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow we die." The whole point of the book is that you can't find ultimate enjoyment in life *unless* you understand that your life is made by God, sustained by God, and given to you *by* God along with other gifts like day-to-day enjoyment.

The *only* way to truly enjoy life is by fearing God and recognizing that we don't know everything. But we know the ultimate truths. We know what is coming. We know that Christ is the *real* King. We know what God offers us. We know what *really* matters. Because we fear God and receive His wisdom, we are able to enjoy life, even when it's difficult or uncomfortable or unfair.

¹³ Garrett

When Chairman Mao was getting prepped for burial, the embalmers were told his remains needed to last forever. They were promised any facilities, personnel, or equipment they might possibly need.¹⁴ But the task was impossible. The result of their efforts was comedic and grotesque.

Our Lord supplies what we need for joy and peace and meaning in life and it *works*. He *preserves* us. He enlivens us. He fills us with joy. *Even when* city hall or Sacramento or Washington are against us. Even when we're not getting what we think we should. Remember what God *has* provided. David Hubbard writes, "The simple graces from God's hand are the daily *staff* of life. We should lean on them particularly hard."¹⁵ By doing so, we can carry on in *His* cause, enjoying life along the way.

¹⁴ Christine Quigley *Modern Mummies: The Preservation Of The Human Body In The Twentieth Century*

¹⁵ David Hubbard *The Communicator's Commentary: Ecclesiastes, Song Of Solomon*