

## **Ecclesiastes**

### **Lecture 16**

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

We are now at Ecclesiastes 8:11, and the Preacher is still on the question of justice in the civil order.

#### **I. Delayed Justice**

Verse 11 says: Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. When justice is deferred it loses its deterrence value. A recent study of NYC crime showed that 41% of murders go unsolved. So, 59% lead to arrests and the number of convictions after the arrest is much lower. So, if you commit murder in NYC you have a much better than 50-50 chance of getting away with it.

For crimes like auto theft or larceny the numbers are even worse. This is something we often lose sight of. For all of our desire to implement the rule of law, and with all of our advanced policing and forensics, still most crimes are never met with justice. In all these cases, justice is deferred to the eschaton, the final judgment. By “not executed speedily” Solomon means deferred indefinitely. The victims and the perpetrators all seem to suffer the same fate – namely, they escape justice. Thus, in the Preacher’s world, as in ours, men believe, not without evidence, that they can behave lawlessly with impunity. Fallen men make the connection that the deed-consequence relationship (righteous are blessed, wicked punished), simply does not hold.

And, thus, the text says, their hearts are fully set to do evil. They say, with the mockers referred to in 2 Peter: Where is the promise of his coming? All things continue as they were from the beginning of creation. This delayed justice is grievous, and it is one of the primary reasons men are led to such horrific conclusions. We are to be people who hunger and thirst for justice. And yet, we are drowning in an ocean of delayed justice. And the gruesome data, the sheer vastness of the unrequited brutality, challenges our faith.

Hope deferred, Solomon said in Proverbs, makes the heart sick. But this delay does not have to be read as those who “fully set their heart to evil” read it. We are to read it as Paul does in Romans where he says it is an instance of the kindness of God which is meant to lead us to repentance. The delay gives men

an opportunity in which they are either storing up wrath, or by patience in well-doing, are seeking glory and honor and immortality (Rom 2). And it is to this eschatological perspective that Solomon moves in v.12: though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life – notice...

We don't have isolated instances of delayed justice. A single wicked life has hundreds of them. Though this is the case, Solomon says "yet I know it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him." This is not something he observes, it is something he knows by faith. The one who fears God is free to do good to his enemies, and to leave room for the just vengeance of God. In other words, delayed justice paradoxically opens up the space for Christian discipleship, for taking up our cross and following Jesus, who is our pattern for living in a violent and unjust world.

We know — by faith — that it will be well for those who fear God. The preacher also knows, by faith, that it will not be well with the wicked. He says the wicked, because he does not fear before God, will not prolong his days like a shadow. Yet in v.12, he observes that many wicked DO prolong their days.

His point here is probably that he will not prolong his days indefinitely. He will die, and when he does, it will be on God's terms, not his. When Stalin came to death, his daughter records that he opened his eyes in a terrible glance, insane and angry, full of the fear of death and the unfamiliar faces of the doctors bent over him. He lifted his hand in a gesture of menace as if to bring down a curse on everyone in the room – the next moment he was gone. Not only will the wicked die, but it will not be well with him, because he does not fear God. So Solomon here falls back again, not on his observations, which would only lead to despair, but onto the faith of Israel. Without this hope, delayed justice would be unbearable. This is why the hope of the Lord's return is not a nice little addendum to the faith. It is central.

## **II. Injustice**

Second point is injustice. Here Solomon's strong feelings of disgust come out in the fact that both the beginning and the end of v.14 state that "this is vanity." Here vanity DOES take on the sense of apparent meaninglessness. There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous.

Delayed injustice is bad enough. But the scandal here is outright injustice. The righteous are treated as the wicked, and vice versa. There is no way for the Preacher to come to grips with this, it is simply double vanity. It is, in the words of Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza, an outrage to reason.

It happens to the righteous according to the deeds of the wicked. And the reverse is true as well: At Stalin's funeral thousands paid tribute for three days as he was buried in Red Square. The victims of his Gulag, or his forced famine, or his summary executions were afforded no so such dignity. The great Russian composer, Prokofiev, died the same day and had 10-15 people at his funeral. This is vanity.

### **III. Joy**

This brings us to our third point, which frankly, seems out of place: joy. This is the fifth time in the book turns to joy as a solution Verse 15: I commend joy. One wonders how we are supposed to have joy in the world Solomon chronicles, and certainly in this context v.15 seems jarring. The Preacher says: I commend joy. The word for commend is to laud or praise. Here he praises joy. He celebrates it. He expects us to experience it. He says there is NOTHING BETTER under the sun than to eat and drink and BE JOYFUL.

I think it is best to take these passages as a kind of holy subversion. They are a refusal to capitulate to the despair of delayed justice or injustice. They are a refusal to let death and evil have the last word. Joy is not joy because, like Louie Armstrong, we think to ourselves "what a wonderful world." Joy is joy precisely in the teeth of reality; otherwise it is simply a cheerful temperament and an averted gaze. If we are to be joyful in THIS world, then it must be the mysterious joy of the man of sorrows, who was annointed with joy above all his companions. Who, for the joy set before Him which endured the injustice of the cross.

This joy is not indifference, but a kind of defiance of the present evil order. It is a present testimony to the END when it will be well with the righteous, and it will not be well with the wicked. Solomon says, at the end of v.15, that this joy is to sustain us. It goes with us in our toil through the days God has given us under the sun. This is why the church, which is not blind to the state of the world, has always confessed that we wait in JOYFUL hope for the coming of our Savior, JC.

### **IV. Inscrutability**

Our fourth point is inscrutability. By this I mean mysterious and beyond our grasp. Verse 16: when I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth – this is, as we've seen before, his search to the scheme of things. It leads to the disturbance of sleepless nights at the end of v.16. V. 17: Then he saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out what is done under the sun. Because the judgments of God are unfathomable, because His ways are past finding out, man cannot figure out what in the world the whole thing might mean. Wise men give up the idea that they can figure it all out,

Even in our age of narrow specialization we find that any given discipline has infinite complexity and depth. When Samuel Johnson compiled his masterpiece of a dictionary for nearly every word in the English language, he wrote this in the preface: I saw that on enquiry only gave occasion to another, that book referred to book, that to search was not always to find, and to find was not always to be informed; and that to pursue perfection was to chase the sun.

Such is the humility that trying to produce one thing – a dictionary, produces. And Solomon is after something much wider and more difficult. He wants to understand what it is God is doing in the world. He started off this chapter telling us there is no one like the wise man. He can know the interpretation of a thing. He can counsel even an absolute monarch. But he can't know what God is doing under the sun.

The Preacher concludes in v.17: even though a wise man claims to know – and many pontificate as if they do know what it all means – even though the claim is made, he cannot find it out. The prophet Isaiah said: as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

We do not confront here a minor quantitative lack of knowledge, but a qualitative, infinite distance. The distance between the Creator and the creature. Solomon leaves us with three crucial pieces of chastened and limited wisdom:

First, in an unjust world, it is the very essence of the faith to affirm that things will be well for the righteous and they will not be well for the wicked. There shall be shalom. Righteousness and justice shall kiss.

Second, in an unjust world, joy is to be praised. It is the holy subversion which sustains us for the coming joy of the kingdom.

And third, in an unjust and, thus, inscrutable world, the providence of God cannot be unraveled or, in many cases, even clearly discerned. Wisdom rejoices, she weans herself like a child at its mother's breast. She does not seek the things that are too high for her.

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