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Ecclesiastes 8: 2-6

God's Righteous Judgement over all

Text: Ecclesiastes 8: 2-6.

Reading: Ecclesiastes 8; I Peter 3: 8-22.

Singing:

Psalm 34: 1, 5.

Hymn 2:3

Psalm 34: 6, 7, 8.

Hymn 40: 1, 4, 5.

Hymn 50: 1-7.

Theme and points:

The LORD assures us that He will in his time exercise righteous judgment over all who have lived under the sun. We see:

- 1) the sovereignty of the earthly king*
- 2) the sovereignty of the heavenly LORD*

Ecclesiastes 8: 2-6

God's Righteous Judgement over all

Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God. Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him, "What are you doing?" Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him.

The present passage places us before a number of questions that are not easily answered. I mean text-critical questions as to the proper reading, translation, and, of course, understanding of the text. The one is connected to the other. If you are not sure as to what the proper Hebrew text is, how can you be sure regarding your ultimate explanation?

We humbly keep this in mind. Yet the general line in the chapter is quite clear and straightforward. I was always taught that the best explanation is probably the simplest one. So we will try to keep it simple, indeed. We will read what it says and try to understand.

In chapter 8, the Preacher focuses on the matter of *justice*, and we may say even *social* justice. There is a king and there are subjects. They live together in a society. In that society there are wicked and God-fearing people. Justice does not always prevail. Often, some people lord it over others and so we do not always get what we rightly deserve.

There are many wrongs in society and much of these remain and fester. Some socio-political conflicts last for ages. Think of the Balkans, Palestine, Ireland, and many regions of Africa. Sometimes we see total hatred exploding into massive genocide. This, too, makes life so vain and meaningless.

Pure and perfect justice

When you take all this together and consider it as a Christian, you know from the entire Bible that the day of pure and perfect justice will

come only when the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of kings, descends in glory to judge the living and the dead. Have no fear, one day the Lord Jesus will be here. That is also the clear direction the apostle Peter takes us in his first and second letters. We must keep this line in mind as we delve into the verses of the text. You can dig, but you must keep the horizon in mind, otherwise you just dig a hole.

In our text proper, the main thought is that of the king and his subjects. “Obey the king’s command”, it says. We even read in 8: 4 that the king’s word is *supreme*. That must make us cautious, but not desperate. I summarize the text as follows:

The LORD assures us that He will in his time exercise righteous judgment over all who have lived under the sun. We see

- 1) *the sovereignty of the earthly king*
- 2) *the sovereignty of the heavenly LORD.*

An important question concerns who is meant by the “king” in the text. Is it Solomon? Or, if the book is to be dated later, even after the exile, as some explainers say, is he a *foreign* king? The text gives me the impression that we are faced here with a typical despotic ruler who considers himself basically sovereign in this sense: “Who can say to me, what are you doing?” Despotic kings do not consider themselves responsible to anyone and they do as they please. But before we blame foreign kings, we should remind ourselves that many of Israel’s kings acted in a despotic and ungodly manner as well.

Obeying foreign powers?

This would not be much of an issue, were it not for the fact that some Bible explainers, also Reformed ones, conclude from this text that one always has to obey foreign occupation powers, for example, the Nazi’s in Europe during World War II. But let’s not go there.

The king who is meant here is presented as a *lawful* authority. Whether you like him or not, he is the king. Fellow countryman or not, he is the king. Benevolent or evil, he is the king.

A level playing field

Notice that in 8: 2 the name of *God* is also mentioned. That more than levels the playing field here. The name for God used here is the name that means the *Almighty* God. I am thankful for that because it puts the king, whoever he is, in his proper place.

In his first letter, the apostle Peter in his first letter also levels the playing field when he writes, “Fear God, honor the king” (1 Pet 2: 17). The king must be honored, but God alone is to be feared. Remember that. We shall always honor those in authority but we fear no man and we worship no one except the LORD. I will get back to that later.

The connection is the oath

At the same time, the text alerts us to a *connection* between the king and God, and that connection is *the oath*. It must be meant here as an oath of allegiance. Despotism often demanded such an oath of subjected peoples and their former leaders. Whatever the case, there was an oath before God, and that oath had to be kept. We must recognize that there is no authority, except from God, as Paul also writes in Romans 13, and as such the king is God’s servant and our master.

Every year (on Canada Day) we see brief reports on television of new citizens being sworn in. One does then take a pledge or an oath of allegiance, vowing to obey the laws of the land and to submit to the rulers of the land. This oath is not a formality, for it gives rights and duties.

“You took an oath before God” to submit to the king, therefore this king does have *sovereignty*. The word “sovereignty” is derived from the Latin *super* which means “to be above”. It suggests then that no one is above the king, and that he is answerable to no one. His word is law, his decision final, and what he says, goes. The text indicates that this is the right understanding in 8: 4: “Since a king’s word is supreme, who can say to him: what are you doing?”

In our country today, we cannot imagine such a situation. Our democracy has all kinds of constitutional safeguards to protect the citizens from despotism or dictatorship. During “Question Period” in the parliament the entire opposition stands up and says to the government, “What are you doing?” But do not try that in a country where there is a despotic monarch, for you would simply be taken outside and shot on the spot.

“You took an oath”, and this has *consequences*. Citizenship has its privileges, but also its obligations, and one of the latter is to recognize and honor the existing authorities.

Show respect before the king

Perhaps here lies the key to understanding 8: 3 where we read, “Do not be in a hurry to leave the king’s presence.” Again, there is here an unresolved question about the proper text and translation. But let’s accept the NIV version. It would be a mistake to be in a hurry when standing before

the king. You should not say: Your Majesty, please answer my request immediately, because I have (more) important work to do. His Majesty might choke on his coke and say, "I'll determine when I respond to your question". Or if you are in a hurry, the king may become suspicious, and wonder, "What's this fellow up to?"

So the sense of the text is to relax, take your time, go through all the proper motions, show respect, have patience, and the king will respond in due time. There is a proper time and procedure for every matter. It is sometimes called protocol. You cannot rush the king; just wait until he is ready to address you.

We must remember that these words were written in an era when despotic rulers would sometimes leave appellants standing around for a long time. They had to wait patiently until summoned.

A bad cause

The text also says: do not stand up for a bad cause. What is a *bad cause*? I would say that it is anything that smacks of revolution or insurrection. There were always so many plots, schemes, and conspiracies going on. Assassination was not uncommon. But the Preacher urges the people never to get involved with that kind of stuff, for the king does whatever he pleases, and that means he will squash the rebellion and they will go under also. We should never be associated with bad causes and the organizations that support such causes. Our policy is clearly anti-revolutionary. And who can prevent the king from squashing a conspiracy with excessive force? The king is sovereign, and answers to no one.

Does this mean that we are at the mercy and whim of the king? Not at all, for look at 8: 5: "Whoever obeys his command, will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure." As in chapter 3, we find here again the motif of the proper time. If you are a law-abiding citizen, why should you come into conflict with the authorities? If you mind your own business, the king has no interest in punishing you. Wisdom is required, of which the beginning is the fear of God.

Who is going to harm you?

We find the same line stressed in the New Testament. I ask your attention now for 1 Peter 3: 13 and following: who is going to harm you, if you are eager to do good? Why should the king and others in power harm you if you are an obedient, hard-working citizen? Peter says this even in the Roman Empire where the church was beginning to experience massive persecution. Look at I Peter 3:14 -15: "But even if you should suffer for what

is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened. But in your hearts set apart (=reverence) Christ as Lord." Have a special place in your heart for the real King, Jesus Christ.

Christ is our sovereign Lord. We are citizens of the kingdom of heaven, from where we expect the great Judge and Savior to appear (cf. Philippians 3: 20). Peter also writes about Christ who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him. And so, in submitting to the sovereign earthly king, we in fact submit to the heavenly Lord.

Above all things, we recognize the sovereignty of our heavenly Lord. He has the first and the last say in our lives. He also taught us what obedience means. He was a free man, yet He let himself be captured. He was an innocent man, yet He let himself be convicted. He was no criminal, but He let himself be crucified. The world cannot understand such a King. The world mistakes meekness for weakness and regards humility as folly.

An answer to everyone

Peter writes in I Peter 3: 15, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." Tell them about your true King, Jesus Christ. But he adds, "Do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience." Christ our King himself displayed this gentleness, even at his trial, in the face of gross injustice with his own life on the line.

The Lord is sovereign King alone. And his sovereignty is accentuated by the fact that He laid down his glory, came to this earth, and *emptied* himself, taking the form of a slave, obedient unto death (cf. Philippians 2:8). Again we see a messianic line in the book of Ecclesiastes. We live under our great and sovereign Lord Jesus Christ.

And it was finally his gentleness that disturbed his enemies most: "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matt 27: 41). They taunted him, but He did not take their bait. Instead, He prayed for them that they might repent and be forgiven (Luke 23:34).

A proper time and procedure

Knowing this, we come to the last verse of the text. We can be patient and calm, "...for there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him." A man's misery can sometimes be almost unbearable. There is so much injustice, as I said earlier, so much suffering, so much exploitation, so much poverty and repression, and

sometimes it is just too much. But shall we rebel? When is the limit reached?

There is a limit, as Reformed theologians have acknowledged. Sometimes the lower magistrates have to call the higher magistrates to order. They do have a civil and political responsibility. There is a proper time and procedure. The limit is definitely reached when believers are called to obey the king above the Lord.

How things have to be resolved, then, is different in each case. We cannot discuss that now. You can do that sometime in a different setting. We need to consider the question of how we can properly, in a Christian manner, improve the lot of oppressed people, for there are billions who are being cruelly oppressed. The misery of men weighs heavily upon them. Come Lord Jesus, Maranatha!

The misery of men

Come, Lord Jesus, indeed. For in all our misery, also the misery caused by evil and oppressive government, we must look first to the great and sovereign King, Jesus Christ. We look to heaven, from where we expect our King who will change our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body and take us unto himself forever (cf. Philippians 3:21). That is our deepest, lasting, and final hope in this life. We must direct all people to this only-sovereign Lord. He alone will grant peace and prosperity to all who expect him. We look for the world to come, the kingdom of God, which will have no end, in which finally all things will be as God intended from the beginning.

AMEN.