

Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

The Mystery of Sin in the Light of the Coming Judgment

A. The Certainty of the Judgment

There is a messianic future, The Teacher says, and it also lights our times today. If folly and madness will not overcome in the end, then a wise (pious) person can bear a lot of injustice and foolishness temporarily. Thus the question of chapter 8:1 is voiced, a question which means: which member of the covenant is so wise that he knows how to determine a proper attitude amid the present circumstances in a practical and believing way? "The explanation of a thing" means: the practical solution of a problem (which arises because of life under a foreign power). This question can be raised because practical wisdom of life is taught in the temple. A man taught in this way becomes different in his heart and behaviour, also towards a foreign government. Wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his countenance is changed.

The king of v. 2 (cf. 2:12) is the non-Israelite king, who also rules by the grace of God and must, therefore, be obeyed (subject to the well-known restriction of Acts 5:29). True wisdom is anti-revolutionary. Here The Teacher directs attention to the sacred oath of loyalty to the sovereign (cf. 2 Samuel 5:3; 2 Kings 11:4; Matthew 22:21; Romans 13:5). This is not a collaborator speaking, as has been assumed; here we have the faithful acknowledgment of the crooked line of chapter 7:13. Therefore, one may not abandon his post hurriedly. Compare the attitude of Daniel, Nehemiah (and Mordecai) toward the heathen king.

The clause, "Do not stand up for a bad cause" signifies revolt, conspiracy, etc. The norm is clearly fixed here. It is also best to follow this norm ourselves, since the king does whatever he pleases. The heart of a wise man knows the time and procedure. There is a time for everything, and an hour of judgment will also come (3:1,17) even though it can take a long time (Job 24:1; Luke 18:1-8). It will come, also for the despotic king, since man's trouble lies heavily on him and one day it will come upon him as a leaden weight. The measure will become full (cf. Genesis 15:15; 18:20). Therefore the wise (pious) man knows how he must act and react time and again.

Another translation for v. 6b is: The evil which man (the tyrant) has to suffer, is unbearable. But essentially it doesn't make much difference. It is evident how difficult it was for God's people, enslaved by strange rulers, to cope with the injustice of those days. But The Teacher found the One among a thousand in the temple! No one can contain the wind, or has power over the day of his death, nor can the relentless martial law be set aside. Neither will wickedness release those who practise it (v. 8). There is a God who lives and gives judgment on this earth (Psalm 58:11).

B. Delay of Judgment

The phrase, "all this" in v. 9 must refer to the following verses. That the law must take its course is confessed by The Teacher in a time in which man lords over man to his hurt.

For he experiences every day what he describes more fully in the following verses. This is not a relapse into pessimism, which later (v. 15) changes to hedonism (love of pleasure). If in everything The Teacher holds fast to the knowledge that it will be well with the God-fearing person, he will lead God's chosen advent congregation to the struggle for the revelation of God's justice in this world (cf. Malachi 2:17-3:5; 3:13-18).

He then states how the ungodly (within or outside of the church) pass away in the midst of their people and relatives and receive an honorable burial, while the righteous are driven into captivity and forgotten. By "the holy place" some people think of the temple, which is not impossible (cf. Exodus 29:31; Leviticus, *passim*; Matthew 24:15). In that case, we think of the fact that the right to visit the temple and of temple service is denied to believers and to the priests - the first step of their exile. We clearly see here an antichristian measure; God's Word is not allowed to work powerfully to open any windows upon the messianic future. We can continue this theme through to Revelation 11.

However it may be, the oppressor reaches his goal completely. The righteous are the ones who hold on to the wisdom of God (i.e. to his Covenant and words) and keep reminding their brothers, who are falling away spiritually, that they are, indeed, the people of God's choice. These humble, righteous people form the core of the spiritual opposition and are therefore not tolerated in public. The ungodly (according to the Scriptures) are people who, in theory and especially in practice, live without God, even though they often retain a semblance of religion. How do they dare do that? Because their evil deeds are not punished directly (vv. 12-14). But it will be well with the godly - a thought which runs throughout the book (cf. 3:14; 5:7; 12:3). In chapter 8:10 it is shown how central Jerusalem and the temple are in The Teacher's thinking. The "meaningless" in v. 14 means: something sad or disappointing, but also with the implication that one would have expected something completely different.

Again The Teacher commends enjoyment (cf. 2:24-26; 3:12,22; 5:18; and see 1 Corinthians 7:29-31). In our difficulties we must not forget the coming eternal joy. The church can cherish her sadness in an attitude towards life which no longer sees the bread or touches the wine. But the hoping advent congregation must also be able to resound the coming joy (cf. Romans 8:18; 1 Thessalonians 4:13,14).

C. God's Way to Judgment

The word, "wisdom" in v. 16 refers to insight into history, especially as it was examined in the previous verses. During his investigation, The Teacher came into contact with the (good and evil) pursuits of man and with God's work in them, since God's counsel is worked out in man's doings. What is the relationship between God's counsel and man's actions? You can think about this day and night, but God's counsel remains a mystery (cf. 3:11; 7:24. His footprints are unseen (cf. Psalm 77). Even though false wise men claim to know God's counsel, God's way and work remain inscrutable. Yet, one day God will distinguish between the good and the evil, even though death appears to be the equalizer. Meanwhile, we should not want to know too much, but continue to trust in God's

inscrutable ways (cf. Romans 11:33). Again, light from the temple shines clearly (cf. 2 Peter 3:8-13).

Questions

1. What is the connection between Ecclesiastes 8 and Malachi 3:13-18 and 2 Peter 3:5-10?
2. The Teacher wants to emphasize that God surely will judge in his time. Nevertheless, notice that verse 8 says that wickedness will not deliver those who are given to it. The wicked are punished by their sin. Do you know any examples of this? Think about 1 Corinthians 6:18. Also consider drinking, use of drugs and excessive smoking (cancer). Punishment of the sin may follow as a matter of course then, but God, the righteous Judge, also directs it.
3. From the gifts (well-being, success, prosperity) that God gives, can we always conclude that God is favourably inclined towards the recipients of those gifts? (See also Psalm 73:12-20; 92:6-9; Revelation 18:5,19 and 24).
4. Do not think that The Teacher is defending or justifying God (God's counsel) here. There are people who think they ought to do that. Such a justification is called "theodicy". Does God need our justification? If so, what is The Teacher's purpose in chapter 8?
5. Can you give examples from the Bible which show how God's counsel is executed in and through the sinful deeds of men?
6. Chapter 8:17 speaks of the conceited man who thinks he knows it all and who thinks he can even see through God's actions. Is Deuteronomy 29:29 relevant in this connection? Do you know what role that text had in the Liberation of the church in 1944? Why?

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