

The Vanity of Earthly Rule
Ecclesiastes 4:13-16; 1 Samuel 16:7
March 12, 2006
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Those who will not seek their joy in trusting, loving, and obeying Christ, will often seek it in gaining power and authority. In gaining power, many believe they will have it all (including possessions and pleasure). An enduring happiness will finally be theirs (they think) when they have the control and clout over others that they covet.

Sadly, as we shall see today, power does not bring the joy of the Lord. Controlling people and swinging one's weight around will not bring that lasting satisfaction in a world of ever changing circumstances and people. It is not those who control people (out of some need to be in charge) that are happy, but those that serve the Lord Jesus Christ and others that are happy. If power and authority (whether in the family, church, workplace, or state) are not used to love and serve God and others, one will become intoxicated with doing whatever is necessary to reach the top. Those who make it their goal to rule others are not happy unless they are honored (as they believe they should be), unless they are respected (as they believe they should be), or unless they are obeyed (as they believe they should be).

Now this is not to imply at all that those who hold lawful offices of authority ought not to be honored, respected, and obeyed as God's representatives (as taught in the Fifth Commandment). But when their goal to have power is that they may be honored, respected, and obeyed, they will abuse their office and will not find an enduring joy in holding that office. For such people, a position of authority is completely self-serving. Dear ones, mark it down: there is no joy when we merely serve ourselves and our own self-interests.

King Solomon now moves from those who seek for happiness in riches (Ecclesiastes 4:8) to those who seek for happiness in power (Ecclesiastes 4:13-16). And just as riches will not satisfy the eye of man, neither will power ever satisfy the eye of man. He that doesn't have it will want it. He that does have it will want more of it. The main points from our text are these: (1) Those Who Are in Power Need Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 4:13-14); and (2) Those Who Are in Power Will Be Replaced (Ecclesiastes 4:15-16).

I. Those Who Are in Power Need Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 4:13-14).

A. Solomon begins with a contrast that will highlight the need leaders have for wisdom.

1. On the one hand, Solomon presents a child for our consideration. The Hebrew word used for "child" may also refer to a youth (or teen) old enough to be trained in various disciplines of study, among whom was Daniel when taken by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon (as we see in Daniel 1:4). Now on the other hand, Solomon presents an old, experienced king. Age (you see) was of great importance in Scripture when issues of power and authority were considered. For the Lord looks upon a child holding a scepter of power over a people as being a judgment that He would bring upon Jerusalem ("And I will give children to be their princes" Isaiah 3:4). To be ruled by youths was not generally looked upon as being a blessing, but rather as being a curse upon a people. Strike one against the child introduced by Solomon.

2. There is another contrast offered by Solomon here in Ecclesiastes 4:13. On the one hand, this child is poor, which also was generally viewed by the world as being a contemptible status ("The poor is hated even of his own neighbor" Proverbs 14:20). On the other hand, the old king would naturally have great wealth. Strike two against this child.

3. There is another contrast highlighted for us in Ecclesiastes 4:14. On the one hand, the child (or youth) that Solomon would have us to consider has recently emerged from the depths of a prison

(due perhaps to some false charges brought against him). On the other hand, the old king was born into a place of nobility and royalty. Strike three against this child.

4. For all of these reasons, it would appear that there is no way that the child would be more qualified to rule than the old king. However, one more contrast is presented which clearly distinguishes the child from the king, and this one difference turns the tables (as it were), and makes the child more qualified to rule than the old king. This one difference between the child and the old king overrules all of the other seeming liabilities or disadvantages on the part of the child. On the one hand, the child is wise. On the other hand, the old king is a fool, and will not be admonished (Ecclesiastes 4:13). The child is teachable, and applies the truth he has to his own life and to the lives of others. The king will not be taught, but is obstinate in his errors. He thinks he knows it all, and will not receive the counsel of those who tell him what he does not want to hear. Because the youth has been graced with godly wisdom, it would be better for the people of that country to have this poor, inexperienced child, who ascends from prison to rule over them, than the wealthy, experienced old king, who is foolish (Proverbs 19:1).

B. Here we see how wisdom brings honor to those who are even the lowliest in the eyes of the world. It is not simply gaining the scepter to rule that brings joy in the use of power and authority. It is godly wisdom that promotes the joy of the Lord in the use of power and authority. Any other use of power and authority will issue forth in dishonor, disgrace, and dissatisfaction. And because one without wisdom will not be able to discern why his “power grab” has not brought the joy he had hoped for, he will look to gain more power and more control, thinking he has not yet reached enough power to have the abiding satisfaction for which he longs. However, the godly wisdom that this poor child (mentioned by Solomon) possesses may be summarized as follows.

1. First, godly wisdom implies that there is a living faith in Christ (2 Timothy 3:15). Only that person who has acknowledged his own foolishness—his own corruption of the mind, eyes, ears, lips, hands, and feet—his own deadness to anything that is good in the sight of God—and his desperate need of forgiveness, knowledge, wisdom, righteousness, and everlasting life through faith in Jesus Christ—only such a person as this has this godly wisdom. For, dear ones, we cannot be truly wise in anything until we are wise unto salvation through faith alone in Christ. Jesus Christ is made unto us wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:30). If we are not willing to confess ourselves to be fools, who will destroy our own lives now and for all eternity if left to ourselves, we will never know the wisdom that comes from Jesus Christ (Proverbs 12:15; Proverbs 3:5-6).

2. Second, godly wisdom implies there is in one’s heart a supreme love for God and His commandments. Dear ones, there can be no wisdom where there is no knowledge of God’s truth or knowledge of God’s revealed will in Scripture. Heavenly wisdom is the application of God’s truth to your life and to the lives of others (James 3:13). Thus, when you pray for God to grant you wisdom (as taught in James 1:5), realize that such a prayer on your part implies that you love and desire to know the Lord your God, first and foremost, and that you love and desire to know His will through the study of His Word. That wisdom that comes from above is, however, more than just an academic knowledge of the truth. A mere academic knowledge will foster pride and foolishness, rather than humility and godly wisdom. It is putting the truth that one knows into action in one’s life, in one’s family, in one’s work, in one’s education, in one’s church, and in one’s nation. Thus, wisdom in your life and mine will bear fruit that is observable to all who watch us. James first tells us what is the observable fruit of a devilish wisdom, and then he tells us what is the observable fruit of a heavenly wisdom (in James 3:14-18). However, even a child can be wise, even those who are relatively new Christians can be wise, if they are applying the true knowledge of God from Scripture (which they have learned) to their own lives and to the world around them. Jesus as a child “increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52). As to His human nature, the Lord Jesus did not have infinite wisdom (even though as to His Divine nature He did). As a child he “increased” in wisdom by gaining

knowledge and applying it to His life, to His education, and even to His subjection to His parents (Luke 2:51). Thus, dear ones, do not think you cannot be wise because you are just a child or just a new Christian. Do not think you cannot be wise because you are more practical than academic. You can be wise IF you desire to be wise, and if you (by God's grace) apply the truth of Christ (revealed in Scripture) to your life. Give me a wise child over a foolish adult any day (that is what Solomon is saying in these verses). Do you want to be wise? Then GROW in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

C. Let us remind ourselves of a couple examples of those who came from relative obscurity and yet were greatly honored by the Lord due to their wisdom.

1. Joseph was a youth sold into slavery by his own brothers, but due to his godly wisdom was exalted to be the chief steward for his master in charge of all that his master had. He was falsely accused of sexual assault against his master's wife and sentenced to prison, but due to his godly wisdom was exalted even as a prisoner to be in charge of all the other prisoners. He was finally brought forth from prison to interpret Pharaoh's dream, and was exalted to second in power in the mightiest kingdom of that time. Being a youth did not prevent Joseph from being honored. Why? Because, dear ones, he was wise.

2. David was just a youth caring for his father's flocks. He was the youngest among the sons of Jesse. He was the least likely (from man's point of view) to rule as king over Israel. And yet he was the very one whom God chose to rule His people Israel. In fact, when Samuel was sent by God to anoint the next king of Israel, Samuel thought the oldest son of Jesse, Eliab, was certainly God's anointed. However, the Lord said this to Samuel, "Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Being a youth did not prevent David from being honored. Why? Because, dear ones, he was wise.

3. In fact, the Lord delights to take those of you who are poor, those of you who are needy, and to honor you by giving you greater and more responsible positions in His own appointed time (Psalm 113:7-8). Dear ones, it is this heavenly wisdom that brings with it an enduring happiness and joy (Proverbs 3:13-18). Here is a great encouragement from the Lord to all of you, if you will but see it and receive it. Don't despise your present status or position in the eyes of the world. Don't despise your youthfulness, your present inexperience, or your lack of wealth or degrees. For, you see, the Lord delights to take those who have a heavenly wisdom (even though they are poor children) and to confound those who have a mere earthly wisdom (with all of the degrees behind their name). He delights to take those who have a heavenly wisdom and may have been in prison and to set them free to do great things for the Lord Jesus Christ. And even if you never gain earthly honor by being promoted to some high and significant position in the esteem of the world, you will be honored by God and in the sight of all those brethren who esteem the honor and riches of Christ greater than the honor and riches of the world. Is it more important to you to be honored among your peers, or is it more important to you to have heavenly wisdom? Dear ones, true honor comes from being wise. No one can gain a lasting joy from honor, from power, or from the subjection of others. For the joy of the Lord comes not from selfish power plays, but from selfless service to Christ and to others.

D. Let us quickly note about this old king that his end is said to be that of poverty (Ecclesiastes 4:14). Why? Because, dear friends, he is a fool and will not be admonished (Ecclesiastes 4:13). This likely means that due to the obstinacy of this old king in sin or in error, that he was either dethroned or that his kingdom was in some way impoverished. This was sadly realized in so many of the kings of Israel and Judah. Consider a couple examples.

1. King Uzziah of Judah was said to have done that which was right in the sight of the LORD, and yet toward the end of his reign he became proud and would not be admonished by the Lord

through the priests of God (2 Chronicles 26:16-19). As a result, his honor and power were taken from him, and he was stricken with leprosy from that time forward to his death (2 Chronicles 26:20-21).

2. King Manasseh of Judah, on the other hand, was a wicked king from the beginning of his reign. He led Judah into gross idolatry and abominations of every kind. As a result, the Lord delivered him into the hand of the king of Assyria, and he was led into captivity for his rebellion and foolishness in resisting the Word of the Lord. However, the story about Manasseh does not end with him dying in poverty and captivity. Manasseh turned from his foolish and wicked ways while in captivity, and sought the forgiveness of the Lord. The Lord then honored Manasseh as he sought out the wisdom of the Lord, and restored him to his place of rule over Judah, where he brought reformation to the one true religion within Judah (2 Chronicles 33:12-13). Even though we may be brought to poverty (whether materially or spiritually), there is yet hope in Christ that we may be honored by the Lord, if we sincerely repent of our foolishness, seek His forgiveness and all those we have offended, and endeavor anew to walk in love and in obedience to His good commandments.

3. Power trips and manipulative control over people will not bring the joy of the Lord. Certainly, we who are husbands, bosses, leaders, or elders must heed the warning as to where foolishness and an unwillingness to be admonished, corrected, or exhorted will lead us: namely to poverty (in some sense). If we use power to control people, rather than to love and serve people, we will be impoverished. We will lose the affection of our people. They will only see in us a desire to honor ourselves and to exert our own control over others. If love is not manifested in godly wisdom, we will soon see that we have no one else to rule but ourselves. For no one will follow us.

4. But let no one think that it is only those who are in power that manipulate and seek to control others. Many, who are not presently in power, yet crave to be in power. Many will posture themselves in such a way as to gain places of status by manipulating others to their own ends as did Absalom (2 Samuel 15:3-6). It is not only husbands that can seek to control their wives, but also wives who can seek to control their husbands. It is not only bosses that can seek to control their workers, but also workers that can seek to control their bosses. It is not only elders that can seek to control members, but also members that can seek to control elders. The point to be made by Solomon is that mere power will not bring a lasting joy and happiness. Only by means of heavenly wisdom and its godly fruit of serving Christ and others will power be a means to a lasting joy and happiness. For our great example in the use of power and authority is He to whom is given all power and authority in heaven and on earth, the Lord Jesus Christ. He used His power and authority to love and to serve us who are ungodly and undeserving by laying down His life for us (Matthew 20:25-28).

II. Those Who Are in Power Will Be Replaced (Ecclesiastes 4:15-16).

A. Solomon (in the first place) has demonstrated that the mere exercise of power does not bring the joy of the Lord. Therefore, we cannot seek for joy in power and authority. It is godly wisdom that brings the joy of the Lord in the use of power to serve God and others. Now Solomon (in the second place) demonstrates that mere positions of power do not bring the joy of the Lord, because people are changeable and unstable, and will shift their loyalty from one ruler to another. Places of honor, therefore, are as temporary as the whims of people. Simply look at how quickly the general population shift in their support from one political leader to another, or from one political party to another. At times the shift in popular opinion may be due to some fault on the part of the leader. However, at other times, the shift in popular opinion may be simply due to unrealistic or ungodly expectations on the part of the people. It is this latter point that Solomon is now driving home. And because the sentiments of people can shift in favor of a leader or in opposition to a leader, one cannot find a true lasting joy in an office of power, if having and holding that office is the source of his joy and happiness.

B. Solomon now gives us a different scenario to consider. However, in doing so, Solomon

continues from the scenario presented to us in Ecclesiastes 4:13-14. After the old foolish king is replaced by the poor wise child, one might have hoped for stability in that nation. But such was not to be the case. Solomon says in effect that all goes well for the poor wise child at first. For all the living of that generation receive with gladness the second ruler that comes to power (that is the poor wise child) according to Ecclesiastes 4:15. But there is a shift in the attitude of the people away from the poor wise child who now reigns in Ecclesiastes 4:16. The people no longer rejoice in him. There is no end of the people (whether before the present generation or after the present generation), who fall in love with a leader just to fall out of love with a leader. What is important to see in this case is that no fault is laid at the feet of the leader (i.e. poor wise child) for the shift in loyalty of the people, but rather the fault is laid at the feet of the fickle people who change with the wind.

C. Solomon teaches you that you cannot allow your joy in the Lord to be regulated by how popular you are in the eyes of others. That is not to say that you should be oblivious to what others think about you (whether you be leaders or not). You should always take care to maintain a faithful witness and testimony before others. You should always avoid offending God, and always seek to avoid offending your fellow man. But, dear ones, whether as husbands, as parents, as bosses, or as elders, not everyone is always going to like the decisions you make. You must always listen carefully to what others say, but ultimately you must make decisions based not upon popular opinion, but based upon faithfulness to God's Word. And even when you exercise godly wisdom (as did this poor wise child that ascended to the throne), popular opinion may shift, unrealistic expectations may rule the day, and you may lose the support of the people.

D. Therefore, Solomon says to all of you: love the approval of God more than you love the approval of man. Find your joy not ultimately in the approval of man, but in "the well done thou good and faithful servant", which all will receive from the Lord when He calls His people home. There, and there alone, is the joy of the Lord to be found. There, and there alone, is peace of conscience and full satisfaction to be found. Dear ones, the minority report of two (namely, Joshua and Caleb) was right and was rewarded by the Lord, whether the majority of the people followed them or not. Only Joshua and Caleb were allowed to enter into the promise land from that generation of Israelites, while the rest perished in the wilderness. Dear ones, you must never follow the multitude to do evil. It is the godly wisdom of the Lord that brings joy—not the power, authority, or honor of man.

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