

ECCLESIASTES 8 WILL EVIL GO UNPUNISHED FOREVER?

We have just seen how the royal Preacher speaks in praise of wisdom, and how much importance he attaches to the possession of it. He ranks it above money, as well as above brute force. And here, at the opening of this chapter, he once more draws attention to the value and influence of wisdom. Wisdom transforms even a person's countenance. It brightens his features, and puts a new light into his eyes. Wisdom imparts a certain dignity and serenity to the soul; and it enables a person to be calm and patient, even in times of political oppression and injustice. The wise Preacher prudently counsels submission to the king. No matter what the individual ruler may be, government in itself is an "ordinance of God." Rebellion against government, when it is not demanded by conscience and by obedience to the King of kings, is simply a policy of self-destruction.

But while the Preacher thus counsels his countrymen to submit to their earthly rulers, he would not have them give up their faith in the righteous government of God. One reason, indeed, why the wise man can bear oppression and injustice with patience is that his "heart discerneth time and judgment." Those who act as tyrants and abuse their God-given power do not see the consequences to which their conduct leads. But a time of judgment is coming, and the heart of the wise man discerns this. Therefore, he can bear present injustice with greater patience, because he knows that a day of retribution is coming for the wicked. However powerful a tyrant may be, he cannot ward off the inevitable end; he cannot battle successfully with death, nor is there any furlough in that war. The greatness of tyrants is only an empty thing, after all. It perishes with them in their graves; and their wicked names shall rot, for men are glad to forget them as soon as possible.

On the other hand, however, it is also true that there is often a considerable interval during which wickedness *seems* to go unpunished. Retribution does not *always* follow closely on the heels of sin. Sometimes it seems as if the wheels of the Lord's government are either asleep or defeated. And this is one reason why wicked men go on sinning, despite the appeals of their fellow human beings and the remonstrances of their own consciences. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." If violations of moral law were always followed by visible consequences, as swiftly as the violations of some physical laws are followed by their results, then there would scarcely be room for the formation of bad charac-

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ Solomon enjoins submission to God's appointed government – verses 1-4
- ❖ He advises the righteous how to deal with hard times under tyrants, and he assures them that their present prosperity will not last forever – verses 5-14
- ❖ The wise man tells us to cheerfully use the gifts of God's Providence, and to humbly adore the depths of His unsearchable counsels – verses 15-17

ter. But sinners imagine that because they are not immediately and openly punished for their iniquities, they may perhaps escape punishment altogether; and so they are emboldened to go on sinning.

Nevertheless, the Preacher expresses his conviction that there truly is a Divine government which blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked. In spite of all appearances to the contrary, Solomon clings to this assurance. He holds fast his faith in Divine justice. The righteous man who fears God – even when he is suffering at the hands of the wicked – is in a better position than the man who oppresses him. It may not seem so to the eye of sense; but sooner or later, this better position will be made manifest. There is an enduring and substantial element in righteousness and Godliness, but the seeming prosperity of evildoers only makes their collapse more terrible when it finally does come.

All this being said, it still cannot be denied that the prolonged wickedness and outward prosperity of some evildoers is a fact which tries the faith and patience of the righteous. It sometimes has the appearance of being inconsistent with the justice of God. We especially feel that something is radically wrong when the righteous are called upon to suffer as if they were wicked, and the wicked are honored as if they were righteous. But on the other hand, true wisdom will not allow our perplexity to lead us into despair. We cannot deny that there are anomalies in the Divine government of the world, but this is no reason why we should entertain a morbid melancholy which refuses to receive and enjoy the good gifts of God. In the midst of all the unsatisfying elements of human life, and in the midst of those problems for which he could find no adequate solution, the Preacher felt that it was wise and right to cheerfully and thankfully accept whatever joys or mitigations of sorrow God would send. The fact remains that human beings cannot sound the depths of the Divine plan! We can see enough of the reason of God's ways to justify faith, hope, and patience; but anomalies remain, which we cannot understand. We must wait for His own explanation of them, in His own time. Meanwhile, since God has given the fuller revelation of Himself and of His purposes in His Son Jesus Christ, then surely we may strive to patiently bear those burdens which the Father lays upon us; and at the same time, we may accept with cheerfulness and gratitude those bounties and blessings which the Father's hand bestows! And in regard to those deeper problems of Divine Providence which baffle us, let us be content to share the reverent humility and child-like confidence of Paul: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!



Lord, we repent of times when we have been discouraged by the seeming prosperity of tyrants. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and make all things right at last! Amen.