

Finite Man Cannot Fully Comprehend the Infinite God

Ecclesiastes 8:14-17; Deuteronomy 29:29

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What do you do when the circumstances in your life do not seem to make sense, when evil seems to triumph over good, when the righteous seem to receive the reward deserving of the wicked and the wicked seem to receive the reward deserving of the righteous? Skeptics would assert that because we do not see the righteous rewarded for their good here upon earth, nor do we see the wicked rewarded for their evil here upon the earth, that either there is no God governing the affairs of man or that if God does govern the affairs of man, He exhibits no justice in the way that He rules. The skeptic would seek to place the infinite everlasting God into a box by foolishly asserting that God is either almighty or holy, but He cannot be both. For He is either almighty (but not holy) and does not care about right or wrong, good or evil; or He is holy (but not almighty) and does not rule with absolute power over all His creation (including man), which explains why evil seems to triumph over good.

Who among us has never struggled to yield in faith to the most holy and most wise providence of our Triune God, who works all things after the counsel of His own will (Ephesians 1:11), and who works all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28)? Who among us has not asked, "Why Lord?", at the untimely and unexpected death of a loved one, or at the rebellion of one of our covenant children who was loved and raised in the knowledge of Christ, or at losing all the financial gain we expected to have by this time in our life, or at the gruesome and heinous murder of unborn children, or at the destruction of Christian marriages by infidelity, or at the monumental growth of false religion in leading millions of souls into the torments of hell, and hundreds of other events that occur in our lives that we cannot understand?

You are not alone if you have struggled with such concerns, for Solomon, the wisest mere mortal that ever lived, likewise struggled with the same questions. In the text that is before us today, Solomon, speaking by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, gives us insight into certain conclusions that he had reached in his study of such troubling questions. The main points from our text in Ecclesiastes 8:14-17 are the following: (1) The Question Stated: What Do You Do When You Do Not Understand the Reason for Events in the World? (Ecclesiastes 8:14); (2) The First Answer: Rejoice in the Goodness of God (Ecclesiastes 8:15); and (3) The Second Answer: Rest in the Wisdom of God (Ecclesiastes 8:16-17).

I. The Question Asked: What Do You Do When You Do Not Understand the Reason for Events in the World? (Ecclesiastes 8:14).

A. In the previous section, Solomon had cast our eyes upon a mysterious aspect of God's providence: the delay of God in punishing sin in the world. This patience of the Lord in suffering wickedness to run its course has been the occasion many times for the godly to cry unto Him: "How long, O Lord?" (Psalm 94:1-4; Revelation 6:10). But to what end does the Lord delay His holy judgment upon sin? Solomon had given us this insight in Ecclesiastes 8:11: "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." Solomon teaches that God delays his judgment, so that the heart of the unrepentant might repent, or be further hardened in their wicked course, and in God's time suffer His righteous judgment for their sin. The Apostle Paul cited this reason for the delay of God's judgment upon the unrepentant in Romans 2:3-4. In other words, God delays His judgment to give us time to repent, and for those who will not repent when God patiently delays His judgment out of His goodness, they will not be delivered from God's wrath, but rather they are only storing up God's righteous wrath to be poured out upon them on that great Day of Judgment at the Last Day (Romans 2:5). Solomon's words not only warn

the unrepentant, but also encourage those who do repent to give thanks to the God of patience who has not immediately poured out His all-consuming wrath upon you and me, but has rather softened our hearts by the goodness of His patience and turned us to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ by faith alone and to sorrowfully repent before Him of the many offences we have committed against Him, against His holy Law, and against His gracious Gospel.

B. Solomon now turns to a vanity which he has mentioned before in Ecclesiastes (Ecclesiastes 7:15), but mentions once again here in Ecclesiastes 8:14: the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous here upon the earth.

1. Solomon calls this a vanity not from a heavenly perspective, but from a mere earthly perspective of one who lives under the sun. From the outlook of one who does not consider what God is accomplishing upon earth in His most wise and holy providence, nor considers the final outcome of the righteous in heaven and the wicked in hell, but only focuses his/her attention on the outward circumstances that can be presently seen, one might question the justice of God in prospering the ungodly, or might question the love of God in afflicting the godly. Dear ones, if you walk by sight, looking only at your own suffering and the wealth that the wicked enjoy, you will be miserable, discontented, bitter, and angry. This is always the fruit of unbelief in your life. If you will not look beyond what you can see with your eyes, you will be under the control of what your eyes alone can see: the whims of man and the changeable circumstances of this life. You will live on an emotional roller coaster every day, and will be tempted to say with the Psalmist, "I have cleansed my heart in vain" (Psalm 73:13). In other words, "I have repented of my sin and served the Lord for nothing." Yes, from a mere earthly perspective, the increase of the wicked or the decrease of the righteous is a vanity and emptiness that cannot be explained from a mere earthly perspective of one who is considering such things from "under the sun". However, from a heavenly perspective of one who lives above the sun, if you walk by faith looking at the wisdom of God that He can make no mistakes, looking in faith at the justice of God that He can do us no wrong, looking in faith at the love of God that he will work out all things in your life for your good, and looking in hope at the final reward of God that He will receive those who trust Him into heaven and will cast those who continue in their rebellion and unbelief into everlasting torment, your life here upon earth will be filled with joy, meaning, and purpose.

2. Dear ones, the temptation to question and doubt the goodness of God, the faithfulness of God, the power of God, or the righteousness of God especially hits your radar screen when you not only focus upon your adversities (or those of your loved ones), but when at the same time you focus upon how well the ungodly seem to be doing. When you look at the contrast—the earthly lot of those who seek to faithfully follow the Lord and the earthly lot of those who could care less about the Lord, you are tempted to question and doubt the God of your salvation. You lose a baby, but the unbelieving family down the street is given a healthy child without complications. You lose a job, but the cursing employee with whom you work gets promoted. You struggle with various physical afflictions, but the guy who embraces some false religion never seems to have a sick day in his life.

3. Beloved, whenever you begin to compare your portion that God has sovereignly allotted to you here upon earth with what God has allotted to others (whether believer or unbeliever), you are usually setting yourself up for a big fall—unless, of course, you compare yourself with those who are suffering so much more than you could even imagine. Dear ones, rather than feeling angry at others or feeling sorry for yourself, ask yourself: Would I as a child of God want to trade places with those who are storing up God's wrath for that certain Day of Judgment that will overwhelm them, even if I must suffer in this life and they prosper in this life? Will I have any regrets in heaven that I suffered so much upon earth when I am enjoying to the fullest capacity the everlasting pleasures prepared for me by my gracious Savior? Will I believe (when I am standing with all of God's elect and with the holy angels before the throne of God in perfect peace) that all my suffering upon earth was not worth this everlasting, holy happiness? Dear ones, you need to repent of all such

unbelief and self-pity, for it is destructive, and it robs you of the joy of the Lord. As a Christian, what are you to do when you cannot explain why events in God's providence have fallen out the way that they have?

II. The First Answer: Rejoice in the Goodness of God (Ecclesiastes 8:15).

A. The instruction of Solomon to you when you fall into doubt and unbelief in regard to God's reason for ordaining the faithful Christian to suffer and the godless heathen to prosper is to consciously consider the blessings of this life that God has given you to enjoy. Rather than focusing your attention on the mysterious and secret providence of God that you will never fully comprehend, self-consciously turn your attention to the gracious and undeserved blessings of this life that God has given to you AND ENJOY THEM. This is practical Christianity 101. Enjoy the Divine blessing of your family, of food, clothing, and shelter, of the measure of health that you enjoy, of being able to see, hear, speak, smell, and touch, of being able to learn, of having a job (even if you would like a different one), of being the child of God, of knowing the truth of God faithfully preserved for you in the Bible, of having meaning and purpose in this life through faith in Jesus Christ, of having an eternal inheritance in the life to come etc. Dear ones, when you are confused, upset, tempted by sin to doubt, to lust, to worry, or to fear, begin to count the many undeserved blessings you have received and consider them in contrast to the everlasting misery you deserve now and for all eternity in hell. If you do not remember what you justly deserve from God for your sin and rebellion against Him, you will never love and appreciate with an eternal grateful heart what God has freely and abundantly bestowed upon you. Contentment in this life must begin with owning that you deserve nothing, except God's eternal, holy, and fierce wrath. Only then can you know the joy of the Lord flowing from a heart, filled with thanksgiving at every blessing given to you by your most gracious Savior.

B. The mirth here commended by Solomon is not a mere outward happiness that has its end in simply enjoying the creature (whether the creature is people, or work, or the pleasures of this life). The mirth in view here is not the mirth of those who live only for what they can get out of this world: let us eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die (as exhibited by the rich fool in Luke 12:19, who thought only of his earthly happiness and then suffered the loss of his own soul in hell). This is a mirth that begins from within and is the fruit of embracing Christ alone for your eternal salvation, the fruit of grasping by faith the free gift of Christ's perfect righteousness and complete forgiveness as your own, and the fruit of owning the Lord Jesus as your life and your chief reason and purpose in living and dying. This mirth or joy here praised by Solomon certainly enjoys the many blessings given by God as His gracious gift ("who giveth us richly all things to enjoy" 1 Timothy 6:17), for not to enjoy the blessings God gives to you in this world is to manifest an unthankful and discontented heart. However, you are not to enjoy the blessings of this world at the expense of enjoying even more the Author, the Provider, and the Source of all these blessings—your gracious heavenly Father. Dear ones, if the blessings you have do not lead you to trust Christ, love Christ, and obey Christ, you are enjoying the creature more than the Creator, and that my friend is idolatry. You can see so clearly the idolatry of those in the world who fall down and worship their movie stars, their athletes, their bands, their politicians, their homes, their education, their jobs, or their health, but dear ones, you have such foggy and unclear sight of your own idolatry. Remember that the Lord's patience with you should lead you to repentance not to rebellion, to soften your heart not to harden it.

C. Solomon concludes this point in Ecclesiastes 8:15 by declaring that this godly mirth or joy of the Lord is that which "shall abide" with you. Your health, your wealth, your freedom, your security, your family, your job, or your home may all be taken from you, and yet you can still by God's free grace not be overcome by your present suffering while the ungodly prosper, if the source of your joy is not in the creature, but in the Creator—if your life is not in the people and things of this world, but in Christ. Dear ones, joy shall only abide within you, if your joy abides in Christ. And if your joy abides in Christ, you will find hundreds of things for

which to be thankful and in which to rejoice to your own comfort and encouragement. As a Christian, what are you to do when you cannot explain why events in God's providence have fallen out the way that they have?

III. The Second Answer: Rest in the Wisdom of God (Ecclesiastes 8:16-17).

A. Solomon says he had seriously and diligently applied his heart to the study of wisdom in order to know the business and employments of men upon the earth, even to the point of losing much sleep over this subject (Ecclesiastes 8:16). Solomon is still thinking in terms of the afflictions of the Christian and the advancement of the unbeliever, as it relates to the affairs and works of people upon the earth. If anyone had the knowledge and the wisdom (the tools if you will) to work out and give an adequate response to the burning question of why God ordains at times the godly to suffer in this life and the wicked to prosper, it would have been the wisest mere mortal that ever lived, namely Solomon. Listen to God's own testimony concerning the wisdom of Solomon (1 Kings 3:12). Now if Solomon (with all of his heavenly wisdom) was not able to fully comprehend the unsearchable mysteries of God's holy plan in the trials that you as the children of the living God suffer, in comparison to the outward success of the wicked in this world, do you (who are midgets by comparison) really believe you will be able to fully comprehend such mysteries? This is not to discourage your study of God's providence. You should not only be students of God's revelation in creation and God's revelation in the written Word, but also students of God's revelation in His providence, in ordering all things for His own glory and for the good of His people who trust Him, love Him, and obey Him. You can certainly learn many things from God's providence if you apply your heart to wisdom. You can see the goodness of God in delaying judgment. You can see the justice of God in judging nations for their wickedness. You can see the power of God in ordaining hurricanes, tornados, and earthquakes. You can see the wisdom of God in using even that which is evil to bring sinners to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Never forsake the study of God's providence and never stop learning that God is near to you in everything you do, in fact as Paul said to the pagan Athenians, "in Him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). God is (if you will) the very atmosphere in which you live, move, and have your being, moment by moment. You cannot escape Him. He sees all. He knows all. He ordains all for His own glory, and for your good.

B. Solomon (in Ecclesiastes 8:17) seeks only to discourage you from thinking you can comprehend all of the mysterious ways of the Lord in this world. You see, dear ones, you must be careful that you do not believe you must first fully understand why God has done what He has done in your life before you trust Him, love Him, and cheerfully submit to His providence. That is to walk by sight, rather than to walk by faith. That is to walk in your own wisdom, rather than to walk in the wisdom of God. That is to treat God as if He were a man who must disclose to you why He does what He does, rather than to treat God as He who is unsearchable in His judgments. That is to treat God as if we were His counselor, rather than the fools that we all are by nature. That is to act as though He who is infinite could be fully comprehended by him/her who is finite. For you to think that you must first understand why God does what He does in a particular instance before you trust Him, love Him, and submit to Him, is (in the words of another writer) to be "lost in the invincible ignorance of your own intellect."

C. In fact true wisdom—that wisdom that comes from above—teaches you FIRST, to believe, love, and submit to God's mysterious providence, and THEN to seek to understand why God has done what He has done in ordering the events in your life or in the lives of others. You must remember that in all events that happen in the world, "The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29). When you have such a desire to know the secret things of the Lord, but have little or no desire to know and obey the things clearly revealed, you are hypocrites and have a mere pretence to religion. Solomon's concern here is practical Christianity 101.

D. In conclusion, learn to rest in the wisdom of God, who makes no mistakes and who can do you, His children, no wrong (regardless of what happens in your life). Dear ones, if you only believe, love, and trust God once you understand why He has done what He has done in your life or in the lives of others, you deal with God no differently than you would deal with a complete stranger, who must first prove himself worthy of your trust before you will trust him. What a heinous sin this is against the absolute wisdom, trustworthiness, righteousness, faithfulness, and goodness of your God. When you must wait for God to give an account of His actions to you before you will trust Him, love Him, and cheerfully submit in obedience to Him, you have in your own heart removed Him from His throne as the Sovereign God. May God grant you to trust, love, and obey Him in order, in order that you may grow in understanding His amazing works of providence, rather than first demanding to understand His amazing works of providence before trusting, loving, and cheerfully submitting to Him.

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