

Ecclesiastes 8: 14-17; “Finding the Work of God”, A Bible Study
prepared for the evening of August 3rd, 2011,
and conducted at the Rendall Home.

Verse 17 says, “Then I saw all the work of God...” In this section he is not thinking about the work of God’s creation. He is thinking about the work of God’s Providence. That is; His holy and wise ordering and governing of all things, as the Shorter Catechism states it. Solomon is not saying that the study of God’s Providence is vanity. He is saying that it is a vain thing to believe that we will be able to perfectly understand all the reasons that God orders things in the way that He does. He is saying here that in his searching to discover the “work” of God, that “though a wise man attempts to know it, he will not be able to find it.” This does not mean that we should not attempt the study of God’s Providence at all. Just the opposite is true. In verse 16, he calls it “applying my heart to know wisdom”. Even so, you and I should apply our hearts to know wisdom, and to understand that God has holy and wise ends in the Providential ordering of all things in relation to men. So this evening I want to ask 3 questions of us in relation to God’s Providence. 1st – Have you personally understood that according to the Providence of God, there are just men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked? 2^{ndly} – Have you personally understood that according to God’s Providence that there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous? And Third – Have you personally understood that Holy Mirth is the antidote to any discouragements which might come to you as a believer?

1st of all – Have you personally understood that according to the Providence of God, there are just men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked?

Verse 14 says, “There is a vanity which occurs on earth, that there are just men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked.” A just man is one who knows the Lord; one who is trusting in the promises of God that God will save them from their sins, not because they deserve it, or merit it by the best of their good works, but for the sake of Jesus Christ. Turn with me to Genesis Chapter 6, verse 8. “But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.” “This is the genealogy of Noah.” “Noah was a just man, perfect in his generations.” When it says “perfect” in that verse it means blameless or a man of integrity. He was a man of faith in God and what God told him to do. In the Old Testament times people did not yet know the name of Jesus, but they were just, because they believed in the promise of the coming Messiah. In Noah’s case, his faith in God was shown by his building of the ark. His salvation was not by his works, but by faith, he did this good work. All people, both Old Testament and New, are saved by grace through faith and that, not of themselves. It was then, and it is now, the gift of God. Those in the

Old, looked forward, by faith to Christ's coming to be the Savior of sinners. We, in the New, look back by faith at Christ's finished work in obedience and suffering for us at the cross. In both cases, when we look by faith, righteousness is imputed to us, and we become a just person in God's sight. That is the doctrine of justification by faith. That is how we are saved. Then we work out our salvation as just persons, when we continue to repent of our sins and live a life of going about to keep God's commandments.

Now, it would seem to make sense to our logical minds that if a person is trusting in God, and he or she has been saved from their sins, that God would never allow any bad things to happen to His good people. Because once a person has been saved from their sins, God is full of blessings upon the just person. Look at Psalm 112, verse 1. "Praise the Lord!" "Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who delights greatly in His commandments." This is a just man. Then follows in verses 2-8 a description of the many blessings the man has, who is just. His descendants are might on the earth, wealth and riches will be in his house, his righteousness endures forever. He will not be afraid of evil tidings, his heart will be established; he will not be afraid, and etc. He gives that person a new heart and abundant grace, to live to His glory and to do and keep His commandments and to bear fruit to Himself in righteousness. He rewards the righteous person for doing good and righteous things. Let's turn to Psalm 18, verse 21 – "The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me." "For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God." "For all His judgments were before me, and I did not put away His statutes from me." "I was also blameless before Him, and I kept myself from my iniquity." "Therefore the Lord has recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in His sight." This is the normal reward of the righteous; to be recompensed; to be paid back in kind for the good that he has tried to do. A righteous man can expect that what he sows, that he shall also reap. If he sows to the spirit, he will reap life everlasting.

But notice that it does not always happen according to this principle. God's ways can be very mysterious at times, in the life of His people. He may permit afflictions and difficulties of various sorts; from bodily diseases and weaknesses to distresses over situations with people, and it may seem that God has left you or forgotten. Sometimes there are just men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked. Turn with me over to Psalm 88 for an example of this. "A Contemplation of Heman the Ezrahite." "O Lord, God of my salvation, I have cried out day and night before You." "Let my prayer come before You; incline Your ear to my cry." "For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to the grave." "I am counted with those who go down to the pit; I am like a man who has no strength, adrift among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave whom You remember no more, and who are cut off from Your hand." "You have laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the depths." "Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and

You have afflicted me with all Your waves.” “You have put away my acquaintances far from me; You have made me an abomination to them.” “I am shut up, and I cannot get out; my eye wastes away because of affliction.” “Lord, I have called daily upon You; I have stretched out my hands to You.” “Will You work wonders for the dead?” “Shall the dead arise and praise You?” “Selah.” “Shall Your lovingkindness be declared in the grave?” “Or Your faithfulness in the place of destruction?” “Shall Your wonders be known in the dark?” “And Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?” “But to You I have cried out, O Lord, and in the morning my prayer comes before You.” “Lord, why do You cast off my soul?” “Why do You hide Your face from me?” “I have been afflicted and ready to die from my youth; I suffer Your terrors; I am distraught.” “Your fierce wrath has gone over me.” “Your terror have cut me off.” “They came around me all day long like water; they engulfed me altogether.” “Love one and friend You have put far from me, and my acquaintances into darkness.”

Now this is truly an awful situation for a believer to be in. It seems as though God is treating him as a wicked man. He talks about God bringing terrors to his heart; his feeling as though his soul has been cast off. He feels a sense of God’s fierce wrath going over him. He has no real sense of assurance. And yet he is able to call God, in verse 1, “the God of my salvation”. He was still trusting in God because we find him praying to God and crying out to God. Surely it is sometimes true that God ordains these kinds of experiences in the lives of His people. And Surely His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ exemplifies this verse in the most supreme sense of its fulfillment: “There are just men to whom it happens according to the work of the wicked”. Look at 1 Peter 3: 18 – “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but made alive by the Spirit.” Look also at Isaiah 53: 8. “He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare His generation?” “For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people He was stricken.” “And they made His grave with the wicked—but with the rich at His death, because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth.” Now do you see why Providentially, sometimes it happens to the righteous according to the work of the wicked? It is so God’s grace can come to sinners like you and me. Christ, the Just, had to suffer for the unjust to bring us to God. Have you personally understood that God sometimes ordains this kind of experience even for His believing people, that they might become more like Him? This is why the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12: 10 – “Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake.” “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” All this would be vanity were it not for the grace of Christ.

2ndly - Have you personally understood that according to God’s Providence that there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous?

That is; that they appear to be blessed greatly of God. Our text says in verse 14b – “Again, there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous.” “I said that this also is vanity.” He is speaking here about wicked people being blessed with blessings that you would think would go the righteous, because they are trusting in God. Many wicked people in this world, and in this life, fare very well, while the righteous do fare as well, and it tempts them to be vexed and frustrated over it. Turn with me to Psalm 73 to see this. “Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart.” “But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped.” “For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” “For there are no pangs in their death, but their strength is firm.” “They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men.” “Therefore pride serves as their necklace; violence covers them like a garment.” “Their eyes bulge with abundance; they have more than their heart could wish.” He is speaking of what the wicked rich have in this life. They appear to have far more of God’s blessings than the believer. They do not have pain in their death. They are blessed with every material thing that they need. They do not have trouble. Wealth and riches are in their house. But “his righteousness does not endure forever, as we read about before with regard to the just man of Psalm 112. Our text says, “This also is vanity.” That is it is vain to think that the earthly blessing of the wicked during their lifetime here upon the earth, is something to be envied. It is rather something to be pitied. Look at verse 15 – “If I had said, ‘I will speak thus,’ behold I would have been untrue to the generation of your children.” “When I thought to understand this, it was too painful for me—until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end.” “Surely you set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction.” “Oh, how they are brought to desolation in a moment!” “They are utterly consumed with terrors.” “As a dream when one awakes, so Lord, when You awake, You shall despise their image.” You see, here are terrors again; but this time these are the terrors that come upon the wicked at the end of their life, when they are cast down in a moment. Thus we see that it is a vain thing to envy the wicked rich. And it is a vain thing to think that just men shall not eventually come out of their earthly fears, worries, anxieties, and discouragements. God will bring them out. Verse 21 of this Psalm – “Thus my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind.” “I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You.” “Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand.” “You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.” “Whom have I in heaven but You?” “And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You.” “My flesh and my heart may fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” And turn to 1 Peter 5: 10 – “But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered for a little while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.”

And finally - Have you personally understood that Holy Mirth is the antidote to any discouragements which might come to you as a believer?

Verse 15 says, “So I commended enjoyment (or mirth), because a man has nothing better under the sun than to eat, drink and be merry; for this will remain with him in his labor all the days of his life which God gives him under the sun.” It is the simple, straightforward pleasures and blessings which God gives every day of our lives that are commended to us here. A believer may indeed eat and drink and be merry to the glory of God. Turn to 1 Corinthians 10: 31. “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” And what greater blessing is there for a Christian, going through this life, than to have a cheerful, contented heart? This is the antidote to all discouragements. This will remain with him in his labor all the days of his life which God gives him under the sun. Remember Nehemiah 8: 10? You think of all the ways that you have fallen short of keeping the commandments of God? You are downcast thinking that God is never going to bring you out of your sins and discouragements? The people here in this Chapter were weeping when they heard Ezra preach the words of the book of the law to them. They realized that God was very displeased with them on account of their unfaithfulness. They would be brought to the place where they would publicly confess their sins in the next chapter. But now the time was for rejoicing in the Lord. It was a holy day. And so in verse 9 it says, “And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the Lord your God’ do not mourn nor weep.” “For all the people wept when they heard the words of the Law.” “Then he said to them, ‘Go you way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord.’” “Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” In others words, it is good for you now to remember holy mirth. It will be help and strength to both body and soul to joy in your God. Joy in His forgiveness. Joy in His truth. Joy in the abundance of Grace that has been given to you. “So the Levites quieted the people, saying, ‘Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.’” “And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them.” Do you understand this? Holy mirth will bring you strength; strength to rejoice in God. Psalm 72, verse 18 – “Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who only does wondrous things!