

Oh, the Injustice

Ecclesiastes 8:10 Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity.

¹¹ Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.

¹² Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him.

¹³ But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

¹⁴ There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.

¹⁵ And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

¹⁶ When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep,

¹⁷ then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.

(Ecclesiastes 8:10-17)

Injustice in the World

Injustice in the world. Death. Depravity. Destruction. It has always been with us. How do you make it fresh and palpable for us to think about today? I ran across an article on our passage, discussing it in light of the injustice that the author feels in his context, far removed from most of us. Many of us know about the problem, but only from the injustices that have been experienced by the other side. Because his context is so very different than the one most of us hear about, I would like to spend a moment thinking about it.

There are two main **people groups** living in **the present-day state of Israel**. These are popularly known as the **Jews** and the Gentile people known as **Palestinians**. We tend to know of the problems as felt so fiercely by the Jews. This is due to many factors, including America's pro-Israel stance, Evangelical pop-eschatology which saw the formation of the state of Israel as the beginning as the start to God's end-times clock, the reading of some Christians that though the Jews were and are God's biologically chosen nation, for some reason, they can never do anything wrong politically, and finally, the Holocaust.

Now is not the time to get into the political and religious plots behind the formation of the modern state of Israel and the Holocaust that far pre-date the beginning of WWII. That's a topic of some importance but is not the focus of my thoughts here. It is enough to say that the deliberate attempt to [exterminate this people group](#) from the face of the earth has rightly garnered the sympathy of much of the world, and that this plays much into our already biased desire to really only want to hear one side of this story. After all, the Palestinians are that ruthless, evil group of people that are always bombing Israel for no reason, right?

The article is from [a Palestinian perspective](#), but more, from a [Christian](#) Palestinian living in Bethlehem. This is his story as he tells it.

My people, the indigenous people of Palestine, have been living under an iron-fist military occupation since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. To establish the Jewish state, the Zionists had to ethnically cleanse Palestine from its indigenous population, expelling more than 750,000 Palestinians (among them my grandfather and his family), depopulating more than five hundred Palestinian towns and villages and committing no less than twenty-four massacres against the Palestinian people. The result was the occupation of 78 percent of historical Palestine in 1947–1949...

In 1967, Israel occupied the remaining 22 percent of historical Palestine: the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, referred to today as the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). East Jerusalem has been fully annexed by Israel since 1980, and although Palestinian governments are present in Gaza and 40 percent of the West Bank (Areas A and B according to the Oslo Accords), the entire area of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip remains under full Israeli military control. Furthermore, 60 percent of the West Bank has already been confiscated by Israel for their ever-expanding settler-colonial project. Life in Bethlehem, where my family has been living for at least a millennium, is marked by Israeli military checkpoints, eight-meter-high apartheid wall, confiscation of land, continuous expansion of settlements, forced separation of families (what my wife and I are going through at the time of writing this chapter), illegal military arrests in the middle of the night, water shortage in order to fill the swimming pools of the Israeli settlers, and the list goes on and on. Zionist perpetrators and oppressors remain unpunished. On the contrary, they live in prosperity and their actions are seen by many as self-defense. Moreover, many Christians who worship Jesus as their Lord and Savior do not hesitate to defend and justify the ongoing [catastrophe on] the Palestinians, interpreting it as an act of divine faithfulness. For me as a Palestinian Christian living under Israeli military occupation, this is absurd, *hebel!*¹

¹ Anton Deik, “Justice in Ecclesiastes (3:16-4:3 and 8:10-17): A Missional Reading from and for Palestine,” *Reading Ecclesiastes from Asia and Pasifika, International Voices in Biblical Studies*,

This author makes the interesting observation that the Preacher of Ecclesiastes most certainly *wrote his Sermon* as someone living in ancient Palestine, which of course, we would call Israel. And, of course, he knows that our Preacher was a Jew. But it's interesting to hear his perspective in light of the great injustices that have been perpetrated on him, his family, and his people, which we do not otherwise hear. My point here is *not to negate* any injustices done to the Jews by the Palestinians; most of you already know those. Rather, this might give you fresh eyes to think about the idea of injustice itself, as the Preacher continues his Sermon today by thinking about the wicked.

Before getting to the text, I want to make one more point about how people look at injustice. Some people reflect *only on the present moment*. Consider the lyrics of the Rapper—Glad Prosper:

*I look around the world today
I see a lot of confusion
I look around the world today
I see a lot of oppression...
I looked around the world today*

ed. Jione Havea and Peter H. W. Lau (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2020), 69-70, https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/9781628372809_OA.pdf.

*I see a lot of corruption
My brothers and sisters
There is no justice in this world²*

Some people have a more idealized view of the past and think that maybe there used to be justice, but not anymore. That's how George Jones has it in his song:

*Sometimes I ask myself what am I livin' for
If wrong can triumph over right
If we are licked before a fight
There no justice in this world anymore.³*

Then there are those who are completely cynical about justice at any and all times. This is reflected in Muse's song, "Soldier's Poem,"

*There's no justice in the world
There's no justice in the world
And there never was.⁴*

² Glad Prosper, "No Justice in the World," *No Justice in the World*, Audioparx (2020). You can find the whole lyric here: <http://9jastandup.blogspot.com/2010/>.

³ George Jones, "There's No Justice," *I Wish Tonight Would Never End*, United Artists (1963).

⁴ Muse, "Soldier's Poem," *Black Holes and Revelations*, Warner Bros, Records (2006).

Ecclesiastes 8:10-17 – Context and Structure

Though we've been thinking about injustice, it is difficult to pick a single topic that *dominates* our passage. There is a lot going on here. **Ecclesiastes 8:10-17** is **8 verses long**. Looking at the verses by themselves, there seems to be several different topics that are before us. One person has creatively suggested **seven “Ds”** in life “**that I can't control**”:

1. Death (Ecc 8:10)
2. Depravity (Ecc 8:11)
3. Deliverance (Ecc 8:12)
4. Delay (Ecc 8:13)
5. Damage (Ecc 8:14)
6. Destiny (Ecc 8:15)
7. Discovery (Ecc 8:16-17)⁵

Not being able to control these things is certainly true, and as such, maybe this is what our passage is all about? But to me, even though this might be helpful as a preaching device, this stretches some of the verses way too far. Nevertheless, it does serve to show that there are multiple ideas pressing in on the Preacher's mind.

⁵ **Jim Erwin**, “Ecclesiastes 8:10-17 The Wisdom of Divine Justice,” *Jim Erwin* (July 13, 2017), <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jimerwin/2017/07/13/ecclesiastes-810-17-wisdom-divine-justice/>.

So can we pick a main idea? As I said last time, this text has such **close connections to the first half of the chapter** that many see it all as a single unit. For example, “**Who is like the wise, and who knows...**” (8:1) with “**Even though a wise man claims to know**” (17). That *could* lead you a very different reading than I’ll give today. And yet, when we get more specific, the subjects introduced in 8:2 and continuing most of the way through the chapter are clearly related in one form or another to the **wicked actions of the king** which increasingly dominated the first half. In fact, our passage begins by considering the wicked ... *in the grave*. So wickedness is definitely important.

It is perhaps possible to see most of the second half of the chapter (8:11-17) as connected together in a chiasm. Curiously, the central idea is, again, **the wicked** (see next page). Specifically, it is the relationship of the wicked to the righteous and how that relationship is utter **vanity** (notice how **vs. 14** begins and ends with that word).

But there is yet **a third idea** that causes us to at least start somewhere near wickedness. This is seen by comparing to the larger chiasm of the book and the portion in chs. 3-4 to

which this finds its parallel. When we do this, something remarkable appears (see table next page):⁶

- A (11,12) 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. Though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged,
- B (12) yet surely **I know**
- C (12,13) that it shall be **well <02896>** with them that fear God, which fear before him: But it shall not be well <02896> with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God.
- D (14) There is a **vanity** which is done upon the earth;
- E (14) that there be **just <06662>** men,
- F (14) **unto whom it happeneth according to the work**
- G (14) **of the wicked;**
- G (14) **again, there be wicked men,**
- F1 (14) **to whom it happeneth according to the work**
- E1 (14) **of the righteous <06662>:**
- D1 (14) I said that this also is **vanity**.
- C1 (15) Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no **better thing <02896>** under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun.
- B1 (16) When I applied mine heart **to know** wisdom,
- A1 (16,17) and to see the business that **is done** upon the earth: (for also there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes:) Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the **work that is done** under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea further; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it.⁷

⁶ Deik, 73.

⁷ Nigel, "Ecclesiastes 8:11-17," *Biblical Chiasm Exchange* (Jan 10, 2015), <https://www.chiasmusxchange.com/2015/01/10/ecclesiastes-811-17/>. To me, this chiasm is probably stretching it, though clearly vs. 14 is chiasmic. However, even if one does not see the passage as chiasmic, vs. 14 does seem to be a central focus. "Central to both passages is Qoheleth's deep struggle with the absence and perversion of justice in the here and now (the third element)." Deik, 73.

Ecclesiastes 3:16–4:3	Ecclesiastes 8:10–17
Observation: Wickedness prevails (3:16)	Observation: Wickedness unpunished (8:10–11)
Confession: God will judge in due time (3:17)	Confession: God will judge eventually (8:12–13)
Struggling with justice in the here and now (3:18–21)	Struggling with justice in the here and now (8:14)
Conclusion: Ironic expression of deep struggle (3:22) Observation: Powerful oppress powerless (4:1) Conclusion: Hyperbole expressing deep sorrow (4:2–3)	Conclusion: Ironic expression of deep struggle (8:15) Conclusion: Unable to comprehend (8:16–17)

Both sections begin with **observations**, move to **confessions** of faith in God and his work, after which the Preacher becomes rather frustrated by the **struggle** that is this world of vanity in light of his confession of faith. Finally, he must reach a **conclusion** on the matter. They are meant to be read together. Deik puts it this way,

By placing the two passages in juxtaposition, one notices the striking parallel of thoughts in both. Each passage contains **four main elements** that Qoheleth goes through in facing injustice and oppression. The first element is the observation of injustice and oppression. Qoheleth then moves into faith response or confession (the second element). Qoheleth does not stop there. Central to both passages is Qoheleth's deep

struggle with the absence and perversion of justice in the here and now (the third element).⁸ The intensity of Qoheleth's struggle is expressed in his conclusions (the fourth element) using a mixture of hyperbole and irony.⁹

Ecclesiastes 3:16 is most informative. “Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.” This very clearly has *injustice* in view. Read together, our passage which begins with the wicked in the grave gives us good footing that *injustice recaptures Solomon's thoughts*. But as he takes us through it this time around, he is going to add different reflections rooted in wisdom and faith. These reflections, as Deik says, should challenge “the church to keep confessing the goodness and justice of God, and to do it ever more clearly and publicly.” She must do so “out of hearts troubled and agonized at the sight of people suffering under oppression and injustice.” Yet, this necessitates that our own hearts would have “open eyes to see acts of injustice and oppression as they really are—as ‘evil deeds’ (**Ecc 4:3**).” These should in turn cause us to “challenge political establishments and call for the

⁸ See note 6.

⁹ Deik, 73.

vindication of the oppressed and the condemnation of the acts of the oppressor,”¹⁰ even as we bear in mind that we cannot know the full mind of God and must remain humble both to his sovereignty and to our own inability to see things as they often are, rather than as we wish they would be.

Ecclesiastes 8:10-11: The Observation on the Wicked

The passage begins, “Then I saw the wicked buried...” (Ecc 8:10). “Then” may change the subject to a new one, but it seems best to me that his flow of thought is not piece-meal and proverbial, but connected and sermonic. That is, it is still reflecting on what came before. In vs. 9 he summarized the evils done by kings as the time “when man had power over man to his hurt.” So what happens to these evil tyrants?

The wicked are buried. It isn’t just that they die, which we’ve seen before. Rather, they are buried. But it is more than just being buried. It is at this point that we run into some serious difficulty with the text, trying to understand exactly what it says. The ESV reads, “They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things.” The idea of the first part is that these

¹⁰ Deik, 83.

wicked men used to feign spirituality by frequenting the temple of God. “Look at how Christian he is!” This in turn caused people to be blinded to what they really were—*evil*. People only look at the outside and what tyrants say rather than what they actually do. Instead of calling out their sin, the people of the very city in which the acts were committed praised them at their funerals.

It is possible that the first part of this is slightly different. It may be translated, “They were taken from the holy place and buried.”¹¹ In other words, these wicked tyrants were given saintly funerals in the greatest cathedrals known to man. It’s not difficult to think of parallels to either of these interpretations with heads of state in our or any other country. The secular world seems impervious to telling the truth about its despots, to the point that they cover their caskets and gild their graves with the pretense of godliness at their funerals. Truly, that is vanity.

But there is still more difficulty in translation. The part where it says they were *praised* could read that they were *forgotten*. It doesn’t really fit the larger flow of the idea if the wicked are buried and quickly forgotten, except that this

¹¹ Graham S. Ogden and Lynell Zogbo, *A Handbook on Ecclesiastes*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1998), 296.

would also be vanity.¹² But the referent to who is forgotten could be **the people who are righteous**. Hence the translation, “... **while those who did right were forgotten in the town**.”¹³ Several commentators have this as their translation.

But the interesting thing about all these differences of opinion is that at the end of the day, **they all fit fine into the overall point**. The wicked are glorified and praised as if they were good, even in the very places where they committed the worst atrocities. Meanwhile, the righteous are forgotten. The wicked get stately, ornate funerals. The bodies of the righteous lay unattended. Whichever way you go, the end of the verse is always true. “**This also is vanity**.”

It is worth returning to the meaning of this word again. We’ve seen how “vanity” refers to **vapor or breath**, something intangible, ephemeral, and fleeting. However, in many instances, perhaps most in Ecclesiastes, it also has the idea of **injustice and oppression** closely associated with it.¹⁴ Sometimes it even seems to be a synonym for evil (*ra*; **2:15, 17; 6:1-2; 9:1-3**). Thus, vanity takes on an even darker element than perhaps we already thought.

¹² Deik, 74, n. 11.

¹³ Robert Alter, Ecc. 8:10 translation.

¹⁴ Michael V. Fox, “The Meaning of Hebel for Qohelet,” *JBL* 105 (1986): 410.

Vs. 11 continues the initial reflection about wickedness, this time with **an observation that many people are completely blind to**. It is a proverb. “**Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.**” There are two overlapping problems **in a corrupt justice system**. One that fails to execute a *just* sentence, but instead punishes too harshly or much too laxly for the crime. The other when *justice never even gets* rolling because the courts are either inadvertently overwhelmed or quite deliberately refuse to take cases. Our Bill of Rights knew how vital it was to have a quick and speedy trial.

How do those overlap? Think about **an entire segment of our population** that believes **punishing** criminals is inhumane. Instead, what we should do, is **rehabilitate** them and bring them back into society without any punishment at all. This form of leftist naivete, rooted in that Pelagianism that people are basically good that we talked about at the end of ch. 7, fails to understand the proverb. Why does the heart of man set like concrete when a sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily? Because there’s no punishment for having done wrong.

Injustice is bad enough. But when those crimes take forever to be tried and judged, or even worse, **never come to justice at all**, what does this do in the hearts of men whose every inclination is already only evil continually? Well, if you keep getting away with murder, and if you rather enjoy murdering, then **there's nothing external that's there to stop you**. God gave the state the sword for a reason. And rehabilitation isn't going to do anything except make the murderer laugh at your foolishness. You know you are living in a corrupt system when certain corrupt people never come to trial or when it takes so long for it to happen that no one cares anymore. **I'd name names**, but I'd likely not be here to preach again next week.

This brings up a vital point about **these two verses**. The Preacher is seeing something here about the wicked. It is *only in the seeing* that he can make the observation. However, **many people are unable to see these things** in the first place. Sometimes it is due to bad theology and anthropology, as we've just seen. And so, their solutions only exacerbate the problem, because they deny fundamental truths about reality. That denial makes them blind to the true source of evil—the heart of the children of man.

But there is also a blindness that comes upon us that prevents us from seeing evil all around us for a very different reason. That is, **we have been exposed** to the evil that to one degree or another we did nothing to stop. Perhaps **we even inadvertently participated** in it. You don't even have to have committed the evil; maybe you just let it happen to you, knowing it was wrong. The point is, we become personally compromised to such a degree that we are not able to be objective to what is going on around us because to do that would mean to look something in the eye that we do not want to see.

For example, it is easy for us, across the Pond and 80 years removed, to look in wonder at the German people who **refused to ever talk about the Holocaust**, pretending as if it never happened, even though they knew it. I know that there are people far removed from Germany that deny things were what we were told that they were, but that's a different subject. Clearly, many many people were murdered not just in Germany, but in Russia and China and other countries during the war. And what I'm referring to is the inability of some who were too close to it to admit it, even though they didn't actually kill anyone personally. Then, in the forgetting of history, we are destined to repeat

it. Are there things going on in our own time and country that might create a similar kind of cognitive dissonance and make us unable to see the wicked before our very eyes? I'll leave that to your own thoughts, only to point out that if we are not willing to see, then we cannot observe the wicked and understand these initial observations of the Preacher. And if that is the case, then none of the rest of the passage will have any meaning to us.

Ecclesiastes 8:12-13: The Confession of Faith

After the initial observation about injustice and the wicked, the Preacher turns our thoughts to a necessary confession. It is a confession rooted in his deep faith in God, even in the midst of injustice. Previously, the parallel had said, “I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked” (3:17). Now, he expands on this. “Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God” (8:12-13).

This is a remarkable passage in light of **an idea** you may have run across that **the OT knows little to nothing of life after death**. But let's think about this carefully. First of all, this is parallel to **God judging** the righteous and the wicked. Thus, it being well for those who fear God must mean **a good judgment** from God and it being not well with the wicked must mean **a harsh judgment** from God for them. But **what time frame** does this judgment have in mind?

We've seen passages throughout Ecclesiastes that **in this life, there is no justice** for the righteous, and the wicked often get off scot-free.¹⁵ That's one of the greatest vanities of the entire book. In fact, **vs. 14** will return to that idea to some extent. That's where our passage illuminates the one in ch. 3. The sinner is either **deliberately** trying to or, because of the vanity of this world, **inadvertently prolonging his life through evil**. He does evil a hundred times and his life is prolonged. Yet, **the Preacher knows** that it will be well with those who fear God. Notice, this is one of the few times that he doesn't *see*, but he *knows*. This comes not from observation, but from conviction and belief.

When will it be well with them? While evil is being committed against them? That is possible, with something

¹⁵ Totally random here, but the etymology of scot-free comes from "scot," a Royal tax and "free," exempt from. So to get of scot-free is literally to not have to pay taxes. Now you know.

like the peace of Christ that passes all understanding that envelops us during times of great persecution (Php 4:7). However, the idea of prolonging life indicates that what is in mind here is what happens at the end of life. The Targum is helpful here (vs. 12). “For it was revealed to me by the holy spirit and I know that it will be well in the world to come for those who fear the Lord who fear Him and do His will.”¹⁶ How interesting that it roots his knowing this in the revelation of the Holy Spirit to him! The Holy Spirit in Ecclesiastes. And that, as understood by a Jew. How ironic that Christian’s don’t see him here, but the Jew did.

Similar is its interpretation of vs. 13. “And it will not be good for the wicked and neither will he have a prolongation in the world to come. And in this world the days of his life are cut short, flee and pass away like a shadow because he does not fear the Lord.” You can hear in this that both this present life and the life to come are in view.

It is interesting in light of this to go back to its interpretation of vs. 10. “And truly, I saw the wicked buried and blotted out of the world and from a holy place where the righteous dwell, they went to be burned in Gehenna and were forgotten by

¹⁶ Céline Mangan, John F. Healey, and Peter S. Knobel, *The Aramaic Bible: The Targum of Job and The Targum of Proverbs and The Targum of Qohelet*, ed. Kevin Cathcart, Michael Maher, and Martin McNamara, vol. 15 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), Ec 8:12.

the inhabitants of the city. And as they had done so *was done to them. Also this is vanity.*” Now, the Targum’s were put into writing around the time of Jesus, so this isn’t proof that *Solomon* was thinking about **Gehenna and Hell**. However, it is proof that Jesus did not make the place up. Rather, this punishment in the afterlife in Gehenna was a widely held belief by the Jews.

I believe that this is evidence that in **the OT, the people of God knew about a future judgment** and punishment for the wicked, but that in the same judgment, God would show favor to the righteous. The Targum got it from somewhere. I think they got it from here.

But **who are the righteous? This is an important question to ponder.** Those who “do good deeds?” No, but *those who fear before God*. That is, these are the people who **have faith in the God of Israel**. The emphasis is not on works first, but on fearing God, and only then is it implied that they are conformed to righteousness in the land of the living.

This confession of the Preacher is really **a confession of faith in his God**. And in the confession, it gives **a great assurance** to any of his people who are undergoing injustice in this world. What a great treasure to have such eternal hope confidently asserted in the middle of book in the OT about

the vanity of life. But it is only a comfort to those who turn to Christ; the rest will have no wellness of soul, and their lives will quickly fade like the shadows when it turns to night.

Ecclesiastes 8:14 – The Struggle of Injustice Here & Now

As quickly as he makes his confession of faith, many commentators suggest that he contradicts it. **Vs. 14** is **the center of our passage** and is itself intentionally chiastic:

- A. There is a vanity that takes place on the earth,
- B. that there are righteous people
- C. to whom it happens according to the deeds
- D. of the wicked,**
- D'. and there are wicked people**
- C'. to whom it happens according to the deeds
- B'. of the righteous.
- A'. I said that this also is vanity.

The wicked are squarely in the middle of his troubling struggle.

And **what is his struggle?** In this life, **the righteous are treated as though they were wicked** and **the wicked are treated as though they were righteous**. That's the way we began the passage. Now he returns to it. When? Not in the next life. But in the *present* life. Luther ought to make you understand that there is nothing new under the sun. He said,

“Formerly everything used to be given to the wicked priests, but now faithful ones do not receive support, and those who teach in the schools are not fed. There is no gratitude for the liberators of the world, except that they are trodden underfoot. But everything is given, and in abundance, to those who are destroying the world and drowning it in evils. So it is that nowadays soldiers have a higher standing than do those who teach aright.”¹⁷

So does this negate his confession of faith? No. I believe it actually strengthens it. It is a literary device: **present** (vv. 10-11); **future** (12-13); **present** (14). **The present bookends the future.** Return to his *knowing vs. seeing* again. When he speaks of vanity, as he did in vv. 10-11 and as he now does again in vs. 14, he speaks of what *he sees*. But when he speaks of knowing (12-13), he speaks of what *he believes*. **The seeing bookends the believing.** The believing centers his seeing. What he believes is despite of what he sees. As Deik says, “Qoheleth’s faith in the justice of God does not mean he can stop pointing out the perversion of justice or being deeply troubled by it ... he holds his faith in tension with his struggle to see justice in the here and now.”¹⁸

¹⁷ **Martin Luther**, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 15: Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Last Words of David, 2 Samuel 23:1-7*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 15 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 142.

¹⁸ **Deik**, 77, 76.

Far from negating his faith, this is actually a sign of true faith. Many people look around the world and see with their eyes the injustice. We've seen that this is precisely why so many secular people love the book. But this isn't faith. Faith is being sure of what you hope for and certain of what you *do not see* (Heb 11:1). Faith is *knowing* that even though the wicked prosper, even though the righteous perish, and even though this feels wrong, it points to the objective truth that this is more than a feeling, more than a cultural convention; it actually *is* wrong. It is wrong because there really is such a thing as righteousness and justice. And if there really is such a thing as that, then it means that in the end, righteousness and justice must win. That means that what we see cannot be the end of the matter. What we are told about eternal destinies, the judgment of God in the future, and the rewards and punishments that attend to the wicked and those who fear God must be real precisely because, right now, everything is reversed. It is good to see. It roots objective truth in things we can verify. However, something is not true because you can verify it. It is true regardless of you. Thus the Lord told Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

Ecclesiastes 8:15-17 – Two Conclusions

This struggle leads our inspired Preacher to **two practical conclusions**. After all, it is not enough to just see. One must believe in the midst of seeing. But belief does not do nothing. Rather, it is moved to action. What kind of action can there even be when you look around at such injustice?

Vs. 15 seems an impossible answer. It returns us to the repeated theme **joy**. It is the fifth of seven joys. “**And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.**” Scholars take very different positions on the meaning of this. That’s because of the fundamental question, *how can you see what’s going on in this world truly, and then turn around and eat and drink and be joyful?* That seems like a contradiction.

Some interpret this verse as a kind of “**strident desperation, or perhaps resignation.**”¹⁹ It’s as if the preacher is taking a cue out of Belshazzar’s playbook when he saw the writing on the wall: **eat, drink, and be merry. For tomorrow, we die** (cf. **Isa 22:13; 1Cor 15:32**). Since there is only

¹⁹ Longman, 221.

injustice and since you can't do anything about it, you might as well live it up now.

Others interpret it as a kind of irony. It is **not a practical solution** to the deep injustices and bewildering struggles with evil all around you to just eat and drink.²⁰ Rather, it is simply an ironic way to “**carry on, wayward son, till there's true peace when you are done.**”²¹ In other words, what else are you going to do?

Those are understandable interpretations, but only when you view the entire book as a kind of skeptical sermon on futility. But when you understand **that joy is in fact the central theme of the entire sermon**, that they are not tertiary, but the bullseye of the entire message, all the other joys must be read in light of it.

- Ecc 2:24-26
- Ecc 3:12-13
 - **Ecc 3:22**
 - Ecc 5:18-20
 - **Ecc 8:15**
- Ecc 9:7-10
- Ecc 11:7-10

²⁰ Deik, 79.

²¹ Kansas, “Carry On Wayward Son,” *Leftoverture*, Kirshner (1976).

Again, we might take our thoughts to [Philippians](#), and what Barack called “[the Ecclesiastes of the NT](#).” In the midst of the suffering church there, Paul says, “[I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in faith](#)” ([Php 1:25](#)). “[Rejoice in the Lord](#)” ([3:1](#)). “[Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice](#)” ([4:4](#)).

You might say, “[It is one thing to rejoice in the Lord, but I can't rejoice when such evil is going on, such injustice, such oppression, and such delusion to it all.](#)” Oh really? You are going to [let evil consume you then?](#) Because somewhere, something terrible is happening, you can't rise early and rejoice at a [beautiful sunrise?](#) You can't come home and enjoy a [wonderful meal?](#) You can't look at [the Front Range](#) and enjoy such magnificent power and rugged splendor? You can't celebrate comradery, friendship, and [fellowship](#) with your family, friends, and brothers in Christ? All you are allowed to think about, all you can think about 24 hours a day, is injustice? This kind of thinking does not coming from faith. Rather, it is consumed by evil.

Yet it is in the evil that God gives us [the greatest supper and fellowship of all](#); our greatest joy, our most glorious meal. Augustine asks, “[How can we reasonably interpret these words save as an allusion to partaking at the table](#)”

which the Mediator of the New Testament, priest according to the order of Melchizedek, provides with his own body and blood? This sacrifice, indeed, has taken the place of all the sacrifices of the Old Testament that foreshadowed it.” (Augustine, *City of God* 17.20).

As much as I appreciate this insight, and taking our eyes to the glories Lord’s Table, my mind thinks of even earlier in the Lord’s life and the very mundane, secular activities he also enjoyed. How interesting that the God of the universe who came in human flesh and knew all things, who came with the express intent of being the Suffering Servant, who knew sorrow greater than any sorrow, was acquainted with grief, who knew betrayal and brutality, and knew it all before it ever happened to him, was said to have come “eating and drinking” (Matt 11:19). “Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard.” Was he not really enjoying life with his friends? Was he faking it, because the only meaningful thing in this world is to be consumed by injustice and evil? You know the answer.

It is into this that I think the second of the two conclusions makes the most sense. Vv. 16-17 say, “When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one’s eyes see

sleep, then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.” I believe this is fundamentally related to the previous conclusion. This is not a changing of subjects out of the blue. It’s not like he’s thinking, “OK, well, I exhausted that line of thought, so let me go back to trying to figure out what wisdom is. Oops. I guess I don’t know as much as I thought I knew after all.”

Instead, I believe this is the key to understanding the joy. He’s already told us that the wise man realizes that he doesn’t know what God is doing. He’s told us several times in fact. He’s already commented on sleeplessness, on searching out the works of God, in trying to find all this out. So why repeat himself now?

I believe it is because in the lack of knowing this, one may rest in the knowing of faith. Our eyes see one thing. Faith sees beyond them. The reality of this world is that it is evil and unjust and perplexing and frustrating and maddening. But God knows exactly what is happening.

We try so hard to figure out what he is doing. But we can’t. We have some clues. We have his Word made sure and

perfect that leads us in a right direction. But at the end of the day, who can know why God does what he does? Well, God can know. And **God does know**.

It is in **the humility of letting go** of the need to know all things, and in the faith of apprehending that **he will make all things right**, and that **he is good** in all that he does, that one can then **eat and drink and be joyful** in the midst of toil, in the midst of sorrow, in the midst of calamity. For God has made the one as well as the other. And he is sovereign over all of it. Not one thing that happens is outside of his ever-watching eye or his ever powerful hand. In fact, in the very next verse, he will turn his thoughts directly to this point. **“But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, man does not know; both are before him” (Eccl 9:1).**

This is **not words of resignation, but faith**. And he knows deeply that only trusting in the absolute sovereignty of the good God will allow him to be able to both **take injustice seriously**, to look at it, to face it head on, to understand it, to internalize it, no matter how internal and painful it may be, while simultaneously **still be able to enjoy** what there is **“nothing better”** than on this earth. God has given

us a great gift of life. And God is sovereign over every part of it.

Therefore, this **living out in the real world the joys of this life** while trusting that God does in fact know what he is doing are two of the most practical things one could ever learn to do. This is what our Lord Jesus did for us. As “**for the joy that was set before him, he *endured the cross*, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). No, in his flesh he did not want to die. “**Father, take this cup from me”** (Luke 22:42). In his humanity, he did not wish it. But his sure hope in the goodness and sovereignty of his Father propelled him. “**Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.**” Both were true. And he did this for you.**

Therefore, **do not shirk from seeing the injustices** of this world. **Nor shrink back from speaking** out about them. **But trust** that God is on his throne and knows precisely what he is doing. Believe that though those who fear God perish, it will be well with them. And though the wicked prosper, it will not be well with them. And enjoy the times you are given now, for there is nothing better in the days of life that God gives you under the sun.

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