

The Political Maze and the Perspective of God

Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

We've been in Ecclesiastes for a few months, and I think one of the best summaries of the book so far that I can give you happened during the chapel service at Veritas Christian Academy last week. I help out with chapel there, and as I stood up to teach the Word of God to these young boys and girls in what's the youth chapel at the church they rent, somehow the smoke machine went off behind me and filled the room. So I'm trying to teach and minister God's Word and there's this constant distraction, everyone reaching for the smoke and giggling. According to my son it was "epic." Not the sermon, but the smoke.

That pretty much summarizes Ecclesiastes. Life is vapor, smoke, vanity. We spend our days chasing our stuff, our relationships, our money, our work, and so on, looking for some significance or gain, and it's all just a puff of smoke that distracts us from what really matters, that doesn't last very long, and that you can't even put your hands around. This is life in a fallen world, life under the sun, life that does not work according to God's design because human sin and rebellion against God has messed the whole thing up.

And one of the spheres of life that we often find frustrating and flawed, particularly as we approach an important election, is the realm of government. Politics. Civic life. That's the subject of the Preacher's reflections in ch. 8 this morning, where we'll see that since God is the only one who can sort it all out, we need his wisdom for navigating the political and social aspects of life in a fallen world.

Yesterday our family spent the afternoon at Honey Pot Farms in Stow, picking apples. If you've been there recently, you've probably seen their new giant hedge maze—the kind of maze you walk through where the hedges are too tall to see overtop of and find out where you're at. In the middle of that maze, if you can find your way to it, is a tower, where you can climb up and see the whole thing from above. That gives you a completely different perspective. When you're down in the maze, it's hard to know which way to go, whether this path is a dead end, or will lead you in circles, or whether it will actually lead you out. From up above you can take the whole thing in; you can see which paths are dead ends and which course you need to take to find your way successfully out of the maze.

One of the challenging realities that Christians face—those who know Christ and seek to follow him—is trying to find our way on earth through the flawed political systems and fractured societies we live in. It's not unlike wandering in a hedge maze, having only the perspective from below, from inside, to go on. Human government is a reality of life on earth, and of course some governments function better than others. But until the Lord Jesus returns and completes his new

creation, God’s people will continue to live lives of dual citizenship—in heaven, where our chief and ultimate allegiance lies, but also as we live out our days as sojourners in whatever nations or contexts we’re in here on earth. And in the meantime, we’re called to be contributing citizens. Think of God’s instruction to Israel while there were exiles in Babylon: “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7). Part of being faithful citizens of heaven is being fruitful citizens on earth.

But when the governments and civic authorities we work with are flawed and fallen (just like us), it’s often hard to know what to do. How to find our way through the maze.

The World We Live In

Ecclesiastes 8 paints a relatively dismal picture of the world we live in and how leaders and societies tend to work. As the Preacher (probably Solomon) puts it in v. 9: “All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, *when man had power over man to his hurt.*” Did you catch that last line? “When man had power over man to his hurt.” That’s the world we live in. Some translations say “to his own hurt,” but I don’t think that’s the idea here. We live in a world where people use power to hurt one another. And sadly, governments, ancient and modern, who ought to bring order and justice to societies, are often some of the worst perpetrators.

If we follow some of the ways the Preacher describes the world we live in with respect to politics and government, we see first a world where kings and national leaders often see themselves as supreme and above correction. Take a look at vv. 3-4: “Be not hasty to go from [the king’s] presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, ‘What are you doing?’” There was once a Caesar, the emperor of Rome, who used to sign his name to documents as “God.”¹ Politicians are a little more subtle today, but when you have power, it’s easy to want to play God. To coerce the system, or even to abuse the system and silence opponents in order to get what we want.

On the other hand, we live in a world where whatever authority kings, prime ministers, and presidents do have is sometimes under threat of insurrection. We see this in the instruction in the middle of v. 3—“do not take your stand in an evil cause” or “do not join in an evil matter,” mostly likely an evil cause against the king, like rebellion or revolution. Governments come and go in this world. In the past 2 years we’ve seen the creation of a new nation, Southern Sudan, and the overturn of several governments or political regimes, like Tunisia, Greece, Egypt, and Libya. Not all of these are the result of revolution, but it shows how unstable the political landscape is.

Moreover we live in a world where wickedness is celebrated, a world of moral chaos. Take a look at v. 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.” This verse is difficult to understand, and some of your translations will say the wicked were *praised* in the city; others will say they were *forgotten*. Either way, we see the wicked being honored, whether

¹ The Emperor was Domitian in the late first-century. See Trevin Wax, *Holy Subversion* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 20, who cites the ancient historian Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars—Complete* (Teddington, Middlesex: Echo Library, 2006).

temporarily in burial or immortalized in civic celebration. Our society has a tendency to honor sin and condemn righteousness, as David Wells has said (and as I've quoted before), they make "sin look normal and righteousness seem strange."²

We also live in a world of weak and flawed justice systems, as v. 11 tells us: "Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil." That's common sense. If the penalty isn't really going to happen, then there's no reason to fear it.

Finally, we live in a world where those who turn their backs on God sometimes prosper, while those who seek to follow God sometimes spend their days suffering. As the Preacher says in v. 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." This doesn't make sense. Now we know from earlier in the book (and elsewhere in Scripture) that there are no perfectly righteous people. Even then, those who are righteous in Christ—by faith in him, by trusting in his merits and his cross—can still face dreadful hardship while those who scorn Christ and take advantage of others "have all the fun." That's not how the world is supposed to work.

All of these realities make civic life less than simple. So what do we do? How do we conduct our lives in a world where people have power over other people to their hurt? In a world where governments are flawed and people are sinners?

How to Live in the World We Live In

The temptation is to respond in one of several ways. Some of us want to take that power from the people who are abusing it, and use it to make the world right. We want revolution. If the problem is that government is corrupt and ungodly, then we need to take back the government. We're like Boromir in Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*, who tries to seize the Ring of Power thinking he would wield its great power for good. But no one wields the One Ring; the ring wields you. So it is with power in the hands of sinners. This is what Lord Acton once said: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." So it is when we seize the ring for ourselves and our cause. The oppressed become the oppressors; the solution is often worse than the problem.

Some of us choose to work within the system for change, but after a while find that instead of changing the system, the system has changed us. This is a familiar pattern among Christian activists in North America—we combine or confuse of the gospel of Jesus and the American Dream. Or the gospel of Jesus and this or that political party. In our effort to use political means to establish God's Kingdom, we often become unable to distinguish between party line platforms and the priorities of the gospel.

And then for some of us the temptation is simply to check out. To disengage from the political and civic world and pretend like none of it really matters. I have to confess this is the temptation I wrestle with. You'll find me to be a pretty optimistic guy in general, except when it comes to

² David F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 4.

politics. Part of the fact is that I don't understand them very well, either. So my default is to not pay very close attention.

But the way forward is neither to hijack the government, nor to capitulate to it, nor to ignore it. So how then do we respond? How do we find our way through the maze in such a way as to be faithful to God and yet to engage fruitfully with cities, states, nations, and world we live in?

What is needed, according to the Preacher, is wisdom. Wisdom. This is how he starts the chapter in v. 1: "Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed." There's a difference in the look of a person who feels trapped in the maze, disoriented, scared, and anxious, and one who has been able to put a few things together and is now moving forward with confidence to find the way out. Their face shines. That's what wisdom does, and that's what we need for navigating the maze.

By wisdom we're talking about more than knowledge. It's not just having the right information; it's knowing how to apply that information to the way we live life. If you think of knowledge as knowing where the target is on an archery range; wisdom is having the skill to pick up the bow and actually hit the target. It's applying knowledge to how we live, knowledge that comes from God's Word and God's ordering of this world. Wisdom is living according to God's perspective, and that's what we need for navigating life in a fallen world.

But wisdom is also limited. We've seen that in this book several times. Just as this chapter begins by praising the wise, it ends by reminding us that no wise person is able to sort it all out. Verse 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, 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" (8:16-17). Though God has made himself and his perspective known to us in Scripture, and even in a more general sense in his ordering of creation, only God is able to ascend the tower and look down below over the maze. Only God is able to take it all in and put it all together. What wisdom we get from him is often just enough to know whether to turn right or left. But it is enough to know how to take the next step, if we're following him, listening to his Word, guided by his Spirit.

So despite wisdom's limitation, the Preacher does give us three instructions in this passage for how to navigate the political maze according to the perspective of God. And that's what I want to look at with the rest of our time.

1. Respect Authority

The first instruction is to respect authority. Respect authority. Look with me at v. 2: "I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him" or possibly "because of your oath to God." The setting here is an instruction to someone working in the king's court, in the government, interacting with the king. Think of the Presidential Cabinet, for instance. And that person is told to obey the king, to respect his authority. What's interesting is that reason he is to obey is somehow rooted in God. Whether it's because God made an oath to the king, or the courtier swore allegiance to the king before God, there is a recognition that God is the one who has placed the king in authority—the same king who is perhaps prone to abuse his authority.

This lines up very closely with what we read in the New Testament. 1 Peter 2:13 says, “Be subject *for the Lord's sake* to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (1 Pet. 2:13-14, ital. mine). Or Paul writes in Romans 13: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment” (Rom. 13:1-2). Even Jesus recognized the authority of the Roman government in his day, saying in Luke 20:25: “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Though human authority and human government is not perfect, God is the one who put it in place. The wise person will respect it. Ecclesiastes 8:3 continues, “Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases.” The wise Cabinet member who hopes to influence the President will observe protocol and avoid insurrection. He or she will even find safety in respecting authority—v. 5: “Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing”—will be protected from harm. That’s what governments are supposed to do—protect those who do right. But this doesn’t mean we will never face dilemmas, or wrestle with what to do when our leaders or our government are doing something wrong. It doesn’t mean we will always agree, or never oppose. But, continuing in v. 5: “the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?” (8:5-6).

Because governments are flawed we will find ourselves facing all kinds of challenges, whether we’re serving in the Cabinet, on City Council, or showing up in the voting booth. But the wise person begins to make his way forward by respecting the human authorities above him.

Now that’s easy to say in the “Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave,” where our government allows for freedom of speech, and encourages us to vote and get involved (though freedom of religion has recently been under significant attack). But what about Christians living under dictators? What about Christians living in oppressive Muslim cultures, where to convert to Christ is to receive a death sentence?

This is where we need to look at the Preacher’s second instruction: to fear God.

2. *Fear God*

When we hear an instruction to obey the king and respect authority, many of us immediately ask the question, so what about when governing authorities do wrong? Is there any limit on our obedience to kings and presidents, teachers and generals? What about when they go so far as command you to disobey God?

We often forget that for much of the church’s history and in different places around the world, the governing authorities have not always been friendly, particularly in the first few centuries of the church. My son Joshua is reading a book called *Peril and Peace*³—it’s part of a church

³ Mindy and Brandon Withrow, *Peril and Peace: Vol. 1: Chronicles of the Ancient Church* (History Lives; Christian Focus, 2005).

history series for kids. The other night he was telling me what he learned about Polycarp, one of the Church Fathers who chose to be burned alive in the Roman Coliseum rather than denounce Jesus Christ. And such was the case for many of the early leaders of the church, and countless martyrs over the centuries.

We're called to respect the authorities. But if we ever find ourselves in a place where we had to choose between obeying God and obeying man, we need to remember that God is the one we must ultimately fear. As Peter said to the rulers in Jerusalem when they forbade him to preach the gospel in Acts 5: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).⁴

To fear God is simply to recognize that he is God, and I'm not, and then to treat him that way—with the reverence and respect that he deserves. Only God is wise enough to accomplish his purposes and sort everything out. As we saw earlier when we looked at vv. 16-17—his plan is beyond us, but we can be confident he knows what he's doing.

Moreover, only God is powerful enough to accomplish his purposes. We see in v. 8 that for whatever power humans may have, the power they use against one another, none of them have power to defeat death. Verse 8 reads, "No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it." All human plans will some day in some way, come to naught. Only God is eternal, immortal, and sovereign. And he has proved it by raising Jesus from the dead.

We fear God because he is supremely wise and supremely powerful. We also fear him because he alone will be faithful to establish justice in the end. Justice is what governments are supposed to establish and keep, yet it's the very thing so often abused. *God will keep justice*. He will bring every evil deed to account—those we've committed, and those committed against us. In the end, all humans who have ever walked on this earth will stand before him and give an account. And left to themselves, all will be found wanting. We are already condemned because of our sin. So we have one of two choices: we either face eternal judgment in hell, or we look to Jesus, God's eternal Son, who took our judgment, God's holy anger against our sin, on himself on the cross, to pay our bill in full. Unlike us, Jesus never sinned against his Father. He alone was able to offer himself as a perfect sacrifice in our place, to give forgiveness and new life to everyone who believes. That's all he asks, to stop trusting in ourselves to make it up to God, and to put all our hope and faith in Christ—to believe.

It's through faith in Jesus that we are not only cleared of our guilt, but also equipped for God's service. Only God is worthy of our undivided allegiance. In the power of his Holy Spirit God sends us out to advance his kingdom, not by seizing power or using the weapons of this world, but by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus, and by following his pattern of self-giving love. Whatever we do in this world, we do as ambassadors of heaven and representatives of Christ.

The wise person will respect authority and fear God. And if we fear God—if we trust him and recognize he's in control—we're also free to follow the Preacher's third instruction (one we've heard before in this book)—to enjoy life.

⁴ See Philip G. Ryken, *Ecclesiastes* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 185.

3. *Enjoy Life*

Verse 15: “And I commend joy, for man has no good thing 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.”

This may feel a little odd in this chapter. After all, we live in wartime—Satan and his forces are pressing against God’s people. Who has time to sit back and enjoy a nice meal? Look around, we’re losing so many cultural and political battles—there’s too much at stake! We may even begin to believe that the Christian faith itself rests on our very shoulders. But Scottish theologian P. T. Forsyth reminds us on what our faith truly rests. He writes, “Our faith did not arise from the order of the world; the world’s convulsions, therefore, need not destroy it. Rather it arose from the sharpest crisis, the greatest war, the deadliest death, and the deepest grave the world ever knew—in Christ’s Cross.”⁵

Yes, we are at war. But the war has already been decided. Our job is to announce Jesus’ victory, and live in the hope and joy of that victory while we wait for his return. And that means, respecting authority, fearing God, but also enjoying life. Enjoying the good things God gives us with a thankful heart and an open hand, recognizing that his good plan may involve taking some of them away at some point. This joy is a welcome companion in dark days, when life doesn’t go as we expect. Because it’s a joy that points us to our greater joy in Jesus.

I think that as long as human governments are made up of sinners leading sinners, we’re going to find ourselves confused at times, frustrated, even outraged and appalled. But there’s a reason Jesus is called King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16)—very politically charged titles. Because he is the true Lord of this earth, and those who know him not only have victory, but a job to do in representing him. May God grant us wisdom to do so faithfully. Amen.

⁵ P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God: Lectures for War-Time on a Christian Theodicy* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1917), as cited in Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 286.