

A Guide To The Reader

Pastor recommends that to obtain maximum benefit from his comments you read in full from the Bible every reference whenever one appears. Otherwise the reading of the comments is simply a skimming over the surface. They are rather designed to make you stop and meditate and even look up further references as the Holy Spirit guides you. Do pray before you read that the Holy Spirit will be your Tutor and that the time you spend will be time spent with Him.

Ecclesiastes 8

8.1. It was the pursuit of wisdom which brought about the fall. “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons” (Genesis 3.6-7).

Wisdom exercised in disobedience to God brought the knowledge and experience of shame and embarrassment. On the other hand, we see (1 Kings 3.12-14) that Solomon was given an extraordinary gift of wisdom in answer to his prayer for “an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad” (1 Kings 3.9). It might seem to be conditional on Solomon’s walking in God’s ways (1 Kings 3.14) though that requirement is only linked there to long life. Now “the gifts and calling of God are without repentance” (Romans 11.29) and the plural use of gifts implies not only the election spoken of in Romans but other promises too. The question is whether by his disobedience Solomon forfeited his wisdom. Now “Christ is made unto us wisdom” (1 Corinthians 1.30). If Solomon’s gift was not withdrawn through his backsliding, described in Nehemiah 13.26, was the wisdom exercised in that time purely a natural, but not a spiritual, wisdom? In Proverbs 8.16 Solomon speaks of applying his heart to know wisdom, where wisdom seems to be the observation of life and drawing conclusions; whereas the gift of God which he was given did not seem to require any searching out (1 Kings 3. 16-28). There it was exercised in the cause of justice which is the reason it was asked for. We do not know the nature of the “hard questions” which the queen of Sheba asked (1 Kings 10.1-9) and which drew from Solomon full and satisfying answers but she does bear credible witness to his wisdom in verses 6,7 and 8. Perhaps we should think that the exercise of this gift is directly from the Lord in the matter of justice and it was for him to search out and understand the ways of man for the purpose of exercising that wisdom. He does so as a fallen man, a backslider at times.

So that the answer to the question “who is as the wise man?” may be summarised as the believer in Christ who specifically asks for His wisdom and guidance in every situation. The backslider is unlikely to make such a precise and timely request, but the truth of the efficacy of wisdom is still valid. Solomon is indicating that any believer may aspire after this wisdom although it was given to him as a gift at the outset of his reign. The question might then be put another way, “who is like me when I first pursued wisdom?” he himself being the example of that “wise man.”

The truth that wisdom is the application of knowledge is affirmed by its description as interpretation. Whether it is the interpretation of the scriptures; that interpretation which enables a person to separate between the precious and the vile; the interpretation of the significance of providences; or the application of facts to the developing of inventions or discoveries; the wisdom which is from God empowers, giving confidence and assurance.

8.2-5. Civil disobedience finds no place in scripture except where the demands of King Jesus clash with the demands of an earthly monarch or lesser leader. Peter declared this specific principle twice. "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye." Having already told the Sanhedrin these words, Peter is rather more terse the next time, saying, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 4.19;5.29). Where the laws of the land are unscriptural as, for example, the requirement of capital punishment, then we must bide our time for the Lord's opportunity, "if thou mayest be made free, use it rather" (1 Corinthians 7.21). "The oath of God" refers to God's covenant with His people. The people of the new covenant should be most eager to keep the commandment of the Saviour, especially bearing in mind His words, "He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me," "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love" and "This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you" (John 14.21; 15.10,12).

8.3. If we imagine a courtier in Solomon's or any other ancient court being summoned to wait upon the king, he must neither be impatient, nor, if he is, show that he is impatient to leave the king's presence to be about his own affairs. It would provoke the king's anger. The king's pleasure is the life of his subjects. So we are to put first the requirements, the commandments of King Jesus. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6.33). Still less are we to desire to leave the King's presence to be free to pursue evil.

8.4. The first recorded spoken words are the words of God (Genesis 1.3), "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light." Power accompanied the word to bring to pass what was spoken. An earthly monarch has a lesser, delegated authority but his word still goes. Whereas the decisions of a democracy may always be questioned, those of a monarch may not so long as he is effectively in power. "O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?" (Romans 9.20).

8.5. "Protection He affords to all Who make His name their trust" runs the paraphrase of Psalm 34 (the hymn "Through all the changing scenes of life"). The whole of Psalm 121 declares that same protection. This is the significance of "shall feel no evil thing." Not that a believer will not come across evil, or be afflicted by evil, but the Lord will always turn it to the believer's advantage in the service of His kingdom. Discernment (1 Kings 3. 9,11) is a keynote of the wisdom that is from above. The discernment particularly emphasised here is the aptitude to tell when the time is right to proceed with any matter or the patience to wait for that time; and the skill to tell the difference in all sorts of situations between the good and the bad.

8.6. This leads naturally to the conclusion that "the misery of man is great upon him." Now you would not have thought this to be other than a jaundiced conclusion. The Lord wishes us to see the discrepancy between exercising wisdom in full faith and, as here, in a backsliding state. If that wisdom only enables us to see misery and conclude that life is nothing but misery something has gone wrong somewhere. Of course, to an unrepentant sinner there is judgment

to come for each and every issue of his life and that certainly brings misery; but at the same time it is an incentive to repent. The misery and the cure are affirmed together in Hebrews 9.27-28, "As it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many."

8.7-8. The misery of a guilty sinner lies in not knowing what will happen to him and when, and especially the time of his death. Not knowing the time of death is no big deal, for would any of us want to know the actual date of our death years beforehand or know how or of what we are going to die? Not to know the way ahead is best practice, but can only be enjoyed by trusting the Saviour. "Trust in him (the Lord) at all times" (Psalm 62.8). No proclamation of freedom to escape physical death can be given in advance, though those who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ at His coming will not know physical death. Even the wicked in hell will not be enjoying the wickedness they prized while here on earth; they will enjoy nothing.

8.9. Rehoboam could be said to have ruled to his own personal hurt when he took too much notice of his peers (1 Kings 12.6-11) inciting Jeroboam to revolt; and this led to the division of the kingdom as the rest of 1 Kings 12 shows. Of course, this had not yet happened in the day when Solomon preached. What is the lesson? We might learn to follow the advice of senior counsellors which Rehoboam failed to do; but a king should follow what was revealed by the Lord to King David, "He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain" (2 Samuel 23.3-4).

8.10. Nihilism (from the Latin word "nihil" meaning "nothing") may well be a very appropriate way of describing "all is vanity." Nihilism is a world view of life which is developed when God is left out of the reckoning. There is thought to be no purpose in life; the natural (but fallen) nobilities of life, listed in Philippians 4.8 are not exercised because there is seen to be no point and they become atrophied. On the one hand scripture declares, "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. Those things (writes Paul) which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you" (Philippians 4. 7-9). On the other hand, if God be rejected, if there be no virtue, then, as in the days of the judges, it is every man for himself; the survival (not always even the survival) of the fittest. If God is taken out of the reckoning there is no One to whom to give account. It then becomes perfectly acceptable to steal and murder and to disobey every other commandment and teaching of the scripture. When this happens dog eats dog, That is to say instead of the rule of law applying equally to all, the disorder of lawlessness applies to all, even to the perpetrators of it themselves. Death continues; and it continues on a massively contrived and hastened scale through ethnic "cleansings," holocausts and religious zealotries. Because there is no point, then people do not matter and the welfare of animals may be preferred to the welfare of people. Human life becomes expendable. Wherever God is rejected, and therefore systems of belief opposed to the Bible countenanced, this is what inevitably happens and is happening to the western world now. Nihilism leads nowhere and is fundamentally untrue. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life (John 14.6).

Ultimately those who espouse this “nihilistic” view will be forgotten; but, of course, it is at the core of their viewpoint that this is of no significance anyway. Scripture urges us not to embrace such a “nihilistic” view of life.

8.11. This is a famous proverb and always to be borne in mind. It is very easy to do things which our conscience tells us to be wrong, but because nothing seems to happen we carry on sinning. But we are none the less, without repentance, heaping up trouble. “Despisest thou the riches of his (God’s) goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; who will render to every man according to his deeds.” (Romans 2.4-6).

8.12. This affirmation draws the conclusion from the previous verse that, never mind the sinner, the believer must not follow the way of evil through being tempted to think he can get away with his fault because the wicked do it and appear to be unpunished.

8.13. “My days are like a shadow that declineth,” says the Psalmist in the midst of being cast down; the sun is setting, the shadows lengthen but the day will soon cease. Again in Psalm 144.4, “Man is like to vanity: his days are as a shadow that passeth way.” If a believer’s life in the normal run of things may be felt properly to be fleeting; if a sorely tried believer may feel the same even more urgently; how much more would it benefit the wicked to be aware that he has not long to repent!

8.14. Injustice rightly goes against the grain. Where the wrong people are punished being innocent, and the guilty go free to perpetuate their sin, is such a situation which could rob a person of his morale and lead to bitterness. But it need not do so. Though vanity is mentioned twice in this verse, it is not the proper conclusion for a believer in the full exercise of his faith; and once again we see the debilitating effect of backsliding in that it leads, almost inevitably, to an entrenched view of life as without purpose. The Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, suffered “the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3.18). Believers, however unjustly treated, are in Him and the injustice they suffer will be transformed to become their weight of glory in Christ. Not so with the unrepentant wicked, whose continuance in sin simply leads to greater condemnation.

8.15. Mirth is certainly not the answer except in a burying one’s head in the sand sort of way. Eating, drinking and being merry will pall as days decline, as Solomon will make clear in chapter 12. However, granted a believer understands his high calling as outlined in the comment on the previous verse, then Paul says to us by the Spirit, “Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice” (Philippians 4.4).

8.16. “He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep” (Psalm 121.4). A person consistently deprived of sleep is greatly weakened. Only of the Lord is this a proper description that He “neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes.” The greatness of God, in sustaining all things and knowing all that is going on even to the thoughts of every person’s heart even if they do not become speech or action, is so great that it is unknowable, unimaginable, to His fallen creatures. In this sense it is also true that we know in part (1 Corinthians 13.12). We are certainly known (1 Corinthians 13.12) but no mortal may know

another's heart and therefore, however much knowledge in any field of learning and observation any single individual has, he shall not be able to find it all. However, this must not inhibit our discovery of the things which the Lord has made. Moreover we should attribute the things, which we are only now discovering, to the Lord who knew everything from the beginning and created everything in the beginning.