

## Teach Us, Qohelet (Part 15)

Ecclesiastes 8:10-17

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Four years ago when I was at the airport in Taiwan, I was waiting in line at the currency exchange booth, and I gave some room to the customer in front of me so he wouldn't feel uncomfortable. But then a boy, who seemed like he was the child of the other customer but actually wasn't, cut in front of me. I was a little frustrated because I had the expectation that people would be courteous in line and give other people their space. Yet back in college when we were stampeding to get Berkeley basketball season tickets, I wasn't expecting anyone to be courteous, so I wasn't upset if people pushed up against me in line. The difference between these scenarios was my expectation. If we have expectations that are not met, whether from God, our leaders, our family, or our jobs, then we will become frustrated. We get upset when people drive uncourteously or don't follow the rules of the road. We fight with our spouses if they don't meet our expectations. And often people leave church because they expect that if they follow Jesus they should be blessed in this life. But in today's passage, *Qohelet* tells us that the world doesn't work this way. Good people often experience more than their fair share of disappointment and frustration. There seems to be little positive correlation between faithfulness to God and worldly prosperity.

In Ecclesiastes 8:10-14 we learn that the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked is not unexpected. In v. 10 we see the wicked receiving praise. In v. 14 we see the wicked receiving what the righteous should receive, and the righteous suffering what the wicked should suffer. The world is not fair. Even we can't always be fair. Sometimes I have to punish both my sons when there is an argument because I can't tell who is telling the truth. Yet we say to ourselves that if we were in charge, things would be fair. And we tend to blame God for being unfair. We ask why we have to suffer more than others after we have been faithful to God. When we read v. 14, we put ourselves in the position of the righteous who suffer unjustly, and others in the position of the wicked. When the wicked are not swiftly punished, it becomes even more tempting to abandon righteousness (v. 11). Yet *Qohelet* says in v. 12 that it is still better to be righteous. This is the same point he's been making for a while about pursuing wisdom and righteousness, two concepts that he uses synonymously in this book. We shouldn't pursue wisdom because it will benefit us, but because it is right and good.

Then in vv.12-13 *Qohelet* says that the wicked man may live a long time, and yet his days will not lengthen like a shadow. These two statements seem contradictory, but it all depends on whether your perspective is on the temporal or the eternal. We see the same sentiment in Psalm 73:1-5, 12-17. The psalmist Asaph laments how the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper, but in v. 17 he says that he entered the sanctuary of God and understood their final destiny. Asaph understood the truth that *Qohelet* also hinted at earlier. In this world the wicked may prosper, but in eternity wickedness will be judged. We must adjust our expectations and our perspective. Don't expect to be rewarded in this life for following God, but look to eternity. Resign yourself to the fact that this world, ruled by Satan, will not be fair. Following God may even cause more suffering for you in this world. But look to the kingdom of heaven, which is inherited by those who belong to God. When Jesus comes to take back the world, things will be made right.

In vv. 16-17 *Qohelet* struggles to explain why the world is so unfair, but must acknowledge that man cannot comprehend God's works. We may like to think we are righteous and God is being unfair to us, but none of us is truly righteous yet, and God gives us all more grace than we deserve. Why some may seem to receive more blessing than others in this world is all in God's wisdom, and is not for us to understand. So let us put our expectation in the age to come, and keep our eyes and hearts on the kingdom of heaven, where moth, rust, and thieves do not destroy. Treasures on earth such as wealth, fame, and power are but rubbish compared to the eternal treasure we have in heaven. Jesus died not to give us worldly riches, but to enrich our lives for eternity. So let us praise Him for this most precious gift.