

Perceived Injustice: Undeserved Praise

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.

Solomon has witnessed the burial of the wicked. As a witness to wicked's burial is left perplexed and frustrated. There is something about this burial that doesn't seem quite right. He describes what he has witnessed as vanity. We know this term refers to something like a vapor or a breath such as something that cannot be grasped; or something that is here for one moment and then quickly disappears and fades away.

According to Solomon the wicked he is referring to used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. It is not entirely clear what Solomon is referring to when he mentions "the holy place." We will interpret his use of that phrase to be referencing the temple, that being the House of God or the primary place of public worship in Israel.

Despite the going in and out of the temple Solomon still recognizes the wicked as being wicked. It is safe for us to say that although this person(s) appeared outwardly religious and moral their actions and their identity remained unchanged and unrepentant. Instead of having a heart of flesh they had a heart of stone and at their core they remained wicked.

Despite being wicked they received praise for the lives they had lived. The city approved of their actions, immorality, wickedness, and hypocrisy. In their burial Solomon witnessed a city that would have publicly mourned their death. They were mourning the end of a life that was destined to face the wrath of God.

A descent burial was a high value in Israel. There is little detail given in Scripture describing their burial customs, but the lack of a burial is included in the curses of disobedience in Deuteronomy 28:26

Deuteronomy 28:26

And your dead body shall be food for all birds of the air and for the beasts of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away.

If the lack of a burial was listed as a curse then a proper burial would have been a high value. While not much is mentioned in Scripture regarding burial practices there are descriptions found in extra-biblical sources. These sources describe burial processions that would be included musical instruments, such as the flute, and public mourners who would loudly cry out as the body was being carried to the burial site. In some instances the public mourners would have been hired labor. They would have been paid to publicly mourn a person they probably would not have known.

Knowing this we can almost picture Solomon watching one of these burial processions going through the city. Solomon, recognizing the character of the individual as wicked would have been very perplexed by such a spectacle. He writes, this also is vanity.

A comparison to what Solomon is witnessing is what Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 6:1-2

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

The burial of the wicked that Solomon witnessed could easily resemble the hypocrites Jesus is describing in Matthew 6. The word hypocrite was also used to describe actors in the Greek theatre would have worn masks, pretending to be someone they are not and receiving praise from others for their actions. Both Jesus and Solomon let us know that they have received their reward and their reward is vanity.

Perceived Injustice: Undeserved Patience

Ecclesiastes 8:11

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

Because the human heart is desperately wicked, when justice is delayed the hearts of man are more inclined to do evil. Solomon witnessed this in the wicked. Verse 11 was written with verse 10 in mind.

By all accounts the wicked appeared to thrive, not receiving any judgment for their wickedness. When they entered the temple God did not strike them dead. When they returned to the city they received praise instead of prison. If evil is not quickly punished our hearts will be more inclined to continue doing evil. If there are no consequences to our actions they why not go ahead and sin?

When people live unrighteously they are taking advantage of God's grace and mercy. If we desire for God to show immediate judgement on evil then God help us all. We would all be guilty. Scripture is clear that no one is righteous and we all deserve death and the wrath of God.

Scripture is also clear that God is patient and slow to anger:

Psalms 103:8

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Exodus 34:6

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."

It is worth noting that God said this to Moses soon after the Israelites constructed a golden calf to worship because they felt Moses was taking too long to come down from the mountain. God says this about himself after delivering the Israelites from Egypt and having his chosen people ignore everything that had just happened to worship a golden calf. If there were any a time for God to smite the entire nation of Israel that would have probably been the time, but he didn't. Why? Because God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Paul helps us understand God's kindness even more in Romans 2.

Romans 2:4

Or do you presume on the riches of kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

While the righteous will recognize God's patience in judgement and repent, the wicked will view God's patience as a means of approval for their wickedness. God's patience in punishing sin should not be seen as approval or indifference, but rather we should see God's patience as a means of facilitating repentance.

While we can understand the lack of judgement against sin as God's patience to draw people to repentance, we can also understand that the perceived injustice of patience as judgement in and of itself.

Psalm 81:12

So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels

Romans 1:24-25

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen!

The perceived lack of justice may very well be God's way of providing justice. The removal of divine constraints both on sin and its consequences is another form of God's judgement.

When we see the wicked, those who do not fear God, receive and do everything they want without the appearance of any consequences, it is very tempting to live in a similar way. However, the verses in Psalm 81 and Romans 1 should act as warnings to those who fear God.

If living in this fallen world begins to look more appealing than the promise of a new life in heaven with your Creator, be warned! That temptation is the same temptation the Enemy used in Eden. Adam and Eve in Eden with the Enemy leading them to believe that creation was better than the Creator. There is nothing new under the sun.

In this fallen world there is a perceived injustice where the wicked receive undeserved praise and patience, but Solomon also wants to remind us that a day is coming where the righteous and the wicked will receive promised justice.

Promised Justice: Justice For The Righteous

Ecclesiastes 8:12

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

Verse 12 marks as a transition in the thought of Solomon. He transitions from what he sees to what he knows. He bings the verse by continuing to reflect on the perceived injustices of the wicked living without fear of consequences. Solomon writes that a sinner can repeatedly commit evil and still live a long life, which would have been associated as a blessing from God.

However, God's Spirit, working through Solomon wants us to know that it will not always be this way. Solomon may see the wicked living freely, enjoying whatever their hearts desire, but he knows the reward they are receiving is vanity. Solomon knows that despite what he can see with his eyes, what he knows in his heart is that those who fear God will experience greater freedom and a more glorious joy in heaven than the wicked will experience in the world.

The unfortunate truth is that far too often the success of the wicked comes at the expense of the righteous. Without naming specifics, in my almost seven years here at Anthem I have sen many times where wickedness has succeeded at the expense of the righteous. I am certain some of the things come to your mind and probably even more so. Solomon had experienced similar things in his life. However, he recognized that what he was seeing with his eyes was a fallen world. A world that has been turned upside down where the wicked succeed when the righteous suffer.

Seeing and believing is one thing. Knowing and believing is something entirely different. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5 that those who fear the Lord walk by faith, not by sight. What we see in this world is broken and we should not be surprised when life doesn't go the way it should.

1 Peter 4:12

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

2 Timothy 3:12

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Let us not just see that this world is broken, but let us know that deep in our hearts. Solomon may not have been able to see with his eyes that it will be well with those who fear God, but he knew in his heart, through faith, that one day things will be made right and that those who fear the Lord would receive everything that God had promised them.

Just as Solomon knew a day would come where those who fear the Lord would be justified, he also new a day would come when the wicked would receive the judgement they deserve.

Promised Justice: Justice For The Wicked

Ecclesiastes 8:13

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.

Solomon has faith that it will be well with the righteous, even if he may not experience that in life under the sun. He has the same faith for the wicked. Although he may not see them receive judgement he knows a day is coming with God will judge them rightly. Their temporary success will end in eternal failure.

Solomon uses a shadow as an illustration for the life of the wicked. The wicked desire to extend their shadow for all that they can. This life is all that they have to live for. It is all that they care about. When the light disappears shadows cease to exist. When the light goes out on the wicked there is no more life waiting for them, only more death.

In verses 12 and 13 we can see the difference between the righteous and the wicked. In these verses we learn what makes the righteous righteous and what makes the wicked wicked. The fear of the Lord is what separates the righteous from the wicked.

The fear, in the fear of the Lord doesn't mean the same thing as it does to fear spiders or to fear heights. These are not communicating the same thing.

The fear of God communicates a sense of awe and respect for the majesty of God. It is recognizing, believing, and living in accord with God's perfect and holy character. He is the God who created us, sustains us, and who will one day judge us. Although the fear of the Lord does not communicate fright, an element of fearing the Lord is recognizing that God can be frightening.

Hebrews 10:31

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

This is why we teach and preach all of Scripture, including the promised judgement. That by doing so God will adopt more children into his family who fear God as perfect holy and who will judge all wickedness.

Psalms 1:5-6

Therefore the wicked will not stand in judgement, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous, for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Conclusion

As we approach the end of our time here this morning I want to encourage you with two applications:

1. Do not envy the wicked

Life under the sun can be incredibly tempting. When we see people who do not fear God achieve and receive everything they want we can easily become jealous and envy what they have. I encourage you don't. Do not envy the wicked. Do not love the temporary present over the eternal future. Do not be like Israel in the wilderness who desired to have stayed in died in Egypt where they received meat, but where they also lived as slaves.

Do not envy the wicked, but practice contentment. Take pleasure is what the Lord has given you and go a step further and share those things with others. Where your treasure is there your heart will be also.

2. Do not give up hope

Solomon is telling us that life under the sun is broken and crooked. The wicked receive what they do not deserve. He also wants to teach us to persevere. Do not give up hope.

The hope Solomon was living with is not the same hope we often communicate. When we use the word hope we often use it to communicate a desire, almost always a desire that is uncertain. I hope this happens, I hope that happens.

This is not the hope I want to encourage you in. I want to encourage you in the hope that Solomon has, which is not a hope in circumstances or other people, but a hope in God who is always faithful, always just, always holy, and always enough.

Live with hope knowing that God's word will not return void and that when he says a future glory is coming that is far and above anything better this world has to offer, have hope knowing that glory will be coming because God has declared it so.

Just said in John 16 that in this world you will have tribulation, but take heart. I have overcome the world. Find hope not in the world, but in Christ.