



# Ecclesiastes

## (8) The Vanity of Government

Ecclesiastes 4:13-16

Isaiah 11:1-5

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One thing that you have to say about the book of Ecclesiastes is that it deals with lots of different subjects. While the overarching theme is the same, the author deals with many different subjects along the way that are related to his theme. I guess if your subject is things about life that are meaningless and empty and vain, you have lots to choose from in this life under the sun. Today our subject is government. We are looking at 4:13-16 and, lo and behold, the author of Ecclesiastes has found a couple of things about government that are “vanity and a striving after the wind.” Who would have thought that the subject of government would have given him material to illustrate that life under the sun is pointless and meaningless!

The subject of verses 4:13-16 has to do with kings. Monarchy was the form of government that was the norm in the ancient world. So, our author, who sees so many things about life under the sun that are problematic, turns his attention to the monarchy.

Before we get to the details of the passage, I want to think with you a little about why we need governments in the first place. Many of the creatures in the animal world do not have kings or leaders of any sort and they seem to get on just fine. Proverbs 6:6-7 says “Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.” Ants don’t need kings. Neither do locusts. And Proverbs 30:27 says, “the locusts have no king yet all of them march in rank....”

Human beings are clearly not like ants or locusts in this regard. Imagine what human society would be like if there were no-one in charge. Imagine what human life would be like if no one had any authority over others. There probably would not be many of us because not many would survive. There would be very little by the way of culture. It would truly be survival of the fittest. If we all had the same authority, there would be little cooperation or organization or protection. It would be impossible to have a civilization. And so, we would be little more advanced than the animals.

We are designed by our creator to work together and to be organized in hierarchies of leaders and followers. Already in the Garden of Eden, before the Fall, Adam was the head and Eve was the helper fit for him. And as the human race grew in number, each social grouping had leaders and followers. With leaders and followers, organization is possible – working towards common goals is possible and so progress is possible. Human beings are meant to live together in community and that requires that there be leaders to organize, set goals, motivate and restrain the unruly. So, we learn from the Bible that God has ordained for some people to have authority over others.

One of the results of this is that the caliber of the leader is very important for the wellbeing of the led. The decisions that the leader makes affect the lives of the people who are being led. We see that in families. If the head of the home is a good leader, the whole family profits from that. If the head of the home is a poor leader, the whole family reaps the rewards of his poor leadership. And the same is the case with larger groupings like countries. The quality of the leaders in government has a powerful affect on the wellbeing of the whole country. That is why elections are such a big deal.

One of the qualities of a good leader is wisdom. Remember King Solomon. He was king of Israel. God told him that he would give him whatever he asked and what he asked for was wisdom. He was wise to ask for wisdom. Solomon understood that as a king he was going to have to make all kinds of decisions. Many of the decisions he would have to make would be difficult to make. The best path is not always

easy to discern. And so, wisdom was needed. By telling us Solomon's story, the Bible is teaching us that rulers need wisdom to rule well.

One of the theories about the original purpose of the book of Proverbs is that it was intended for the training of future leaders in Israel. There is a lot in the book of Proverbs about kings and how to conduct yourself around kings and so some scholars believe that the original purpose of that collection of wisdom was to train young men who would later occupy positions of authority in government. Whether or not that is true, it is undeniable that the wisdom in the book of Proverbs would be necessary for rulers to lead affectively. Proverbs 8:15-16: Wisdom is speaking here, and she says, "<sup>15</sup>By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; <sup>16</sup>by me princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly."

And so, we come to our text. Ecclesiastes 4:13-14, "Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had been born poor." The picture seems to be that of a poor but wise youth who went from prison to the throne. A youth had been poor, but wise. He had found himself in prison, perhaps because of a debt that he could not pay, but because of his wisdom he had been elevated to the position of the king. No doubt it was a process. Through the years he naturally rose to leadership positions in the community because he was recognized to be a wise man. And eventually he ends up on the top of the pile. Eventually he became the king.

But somewhere along the line, after he had become king, he stopped listening to advice. He became proud and overconfident. He had years of experience. He had a very good track record. He had made hundreds of wise decisions. He had also become full of himself. He considered himself to be smarter than everyone else. And he stopped listening to advice. And so, he who had been a poor and wise youth ending up being an old and foolish king.

This is an observation of the author of Ecclesiastes. This sort of thing happened often enough to become a saying. And Ecclesiastes includes it as an example of something that is a mystery. There is an example of something that is wrong with the world. "[A]n old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice."

First notice that this is one of those observations that runs counter to traditional wisdom. Traditional wisdom says that as people age, they gain wisdom. Those who are older have experience. Experience is one of the sources of wisdom. Young people lack experience and so they tend to be a little shallower when it comes to wisdom. Job 12:12 says, “Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in the length of days.” And many times, in the book of Proverbs, it is the voice of a more mature person passing on wisdom to someone who is younger. This is the way it ought to be. And this is often the way it is. People often do gain wisdom from experience.

But not always. This is another case of the author of Ecclesiastes questioning traditional wisdom. Older people should be wiser than younger people. This is the way the world is supposed to work. This is what you would expect to happen. But it is not always so. Sometimes young people are wiser than older people. Sometimes older people have not learned much from their experience in life. Sometimes people are wiser when they are young and actually become fools when they are old. So, the author of Ecclesiastes is placing before us another conundrum of this earthly life. Here is something else that does not make sense.

Now the thing that made this old king a fool was that he “no longer knew how to take advice.” Taking advice from other people is one of the key characteristics of a wise person according to the wisdom of the Bible. Proverbs 12:15 says, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.” Here is another way that God has created the human race to be interdependent. We are not meant to go it alone. Wisdom is important for success in life and one of the sources of wisdom is advice from others. There is something communal about wisdom. It comes from deliberation. It is not something that we have in isolation from others. We are created as communal beings. Wisdom comes from learning from others.

This comes from the fact that we are finite. We are finite. Our minds are finite. That means limited. We can't see all the angles of a situation. We might be wondering, should I take this job, or should I marry this person, or should I take this or that course of action? By ourselves, our

perspective is very limited. We do not see all the relevant factors. Perhaps there are dangers or problems of which we are not aware. Wisdom means getting the perspectives of other people. Others see things that we do not see. Perhaps they see a disadvantage of a certain course of action that we have not thought of. Wisdom means being aware of our own limitations and the advantages of getting the insights of others.

Getting the advice of others also helps with the fact that often we are **not willing** to see the problems of going in a certain direction. It is not only that we are finite so that we are limited in our perspective, it is also that we have a way of not noticing things we don't want to notice. So, a young person wants to buy a used car. The price is good. The body is immaculate. She can see herself driving down the road in that beautiful car. But she chooses not to see that the exhaust has a bluish tinge. We human beings have a remarkable ability not to see what we don't want to see. Wisdom means getting insights from others who are less emotionally invested in a certain course of action and who therefore can bring a more objective perspective. "My dear that car looks nice, but the motor is shot."

Now this is important for young people. Young people can benefit from the experience of older people, and it is foolish not to take advantage of that. But the conundrum that Ecclesiastes is pointing out in our text is that of an older person who "no longer knew how to take advice." Older people should be well aware of the importance of taking advice from others. They have a lifetime of watching people make mistakes because they were not willing to take advice. They should know how important it is not to be wise in your own eyes. And yet sometimes it happens that older people think that their own life-experience is enough and that they are no longer dependent upon the advice of others.

The author of Ecclesiastes has noticed "an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice." Older and experienced people can feel secure in their lives. They have experienced many things. They have learned life-lessons along the way. Perhaps they have been very successful in life. But being sinful human beings, they can become proud

and self-sufficient. They can think that they have seen it all. They can think that advice is only for the young and inexperienced. And so, they can think of themselves beyond the need for advice.

This passage is telling us that that is not so. This passage is telling us that no matter how old and experienced you are, you are not self-sufficient. You still need the advice of other people. This is one of the things that the author of Ecclesiastes is bringing before us as something about life that is vain and empty. Older people who should be wise because of their experience in life, often are not.

And this is all the more a disaster when the person who is old and foolish is a king – a ruler – someone in authority whose decisions affect the lives of others. Now because the text is speaking about a king, let's apply this to our own political situation.

One point is that we should pray that our political leaders will be wise whether they are young or whether they are old. Both young and old can be wise. Both young and old can be fools. Both young and old need to take advice in order to be wise. We should pray that our leaders will not be wise in their own eyes, but that they will get good advice and that they will listen to it. People in positions of power have a greater potential to do good and a greater potential to do harm and so their need for wisdom is all the more important. In 1 Timothy 2:1-2, Paul tells us to pray "for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way." It takes wisdom to make that happen.

We should also support and follow the lead of those Christian organizations that are devoted to getting the best advice to our political leaders. We have a number of organizations that exist for that very purpose. They need us to participate with them in their work. In our society we have a role to play in getting biblically based wisdom to our leaders with the prayer that they will be wise and follow the advice that is rooted in the unchanging truth of God.

But we do see a lot of foolishness among our leaders. And the greatest reason for that is that the majority of them do not fear the Lord and fearing the Lord, we are told in Proverbs, is the beginning of wisdom.

Fearing the Lord is the foundation of all true wisdom. The majority of our political leaders are wise in their own eyes, because they do not submit themselves to the wisdom of the Word of God and so they are foolish by definition. And we see that in many ways. We see it in the fact that our governments not only do not discourage, they actively promote lifestyles that the Bible condemns. That is the ultimate in foolishness and the consequences of that have already been catastrophic and will ultimately lead to even greater disintegration of our society. To reject the wisdom of God's word is to reject the way that the world is designed to function and the consequences of that can never be life-giving.

This is certainly one of the things that is vanity and a striving after the wind in life under the sun. Those who should be wise are often not wise. Political leaders who should be wise are often not wise. And while there sometimes is a measure of temporal wisdom, the rejection of the wisdom of the word of God is the ultimate folly and so there is a sense in which the whole enterprise of godless government is a vanity and a striving after the wind. That this not to say that godless government is useless. All governments are appointed by God and are useful in providing order. We are certainly better off with bad government than we would be without government at all. But the fact that so many of our leaders are fools because they do not heed the wisdom of the word of God is part of the vanity of life lived under the sun.

The last two verses of our text show us another aspect of government that is vanity and a striving after the wind. They picture another youth who became a king. There are a number of interpretive difficulties here, but one possible way of reading these verses is that they refer to a second situation. Verse 15, "I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that [a second] youth who was to stand in the king's place." The next verse seems to say that this king had many people following him in his lifetime, but those who came later did not think he had been a good king. Verse 16, "There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him."

What this seems to be saying is that people are fickle. You have a king in place and many people are following him. But then, inevitably there will

be others who come later who will not agree with this king and what he tried to accomplish. Now in those days there was no democracy as we know it. Kings were not elected. But they could be removed and replaced by other means – by coups and by insurrections. So, in the OT, we regularly see kings being replaced. And what this means is you do not have continuity. One king governs for a while he and he has his agenda. But then he is replaced with another king and another agenda. In the OT we see a godly king replaced by an ungodly king and the one king undoes the accomplishments of the king before him.

We certainly see this in our day. We have leaders who lead for a while and those who come later to not rejoice in them. One government has an agenda. It is replaced with another government who undoes what the first government has done, and it goes lurching off in another direction. And in the end the whole business of government is a very imperfect business. There is lots of waste. There are lots of inefficiencies. There are lots of changes in direction. Governments lurch from one direction to another. And the net result is better than no government, but there is also a lot of vanity and a striving after the wind.

So, the whole area of government under the sun is riddled with things that are not as they ought to be. It has always been better than no government, but it has always been rather a mess with its fair share of fools and with its constantly being replaced with a different king with a different agenda. And this says Ecclesiastes is vanity and a striving after the wind.

Where is the gospel here? The gospel flows from the fact that human governments are but a stop-gap measure to make it possible to live together as human beings with some sort of order in this life under the sun. They are never ideal. They are always grossly imperfect, populated by sinful people who are fools as often as they are wise. If there is a half decent government, it will be replaced by a government with a completely different agenda. There is much about any government about which it must be said, “Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind.”

The good news is that the imperfections of human governments makes us realize that we need a government that does not participate in the brokenness and imperfection of any king or any ruler in this world. We need a king who is perfectly wise and who will never be and old and foolish king. We need a king who will be revered and followed not for a limited period of time, but forever.

And you see that is what God began to promise to Israel during the period that the author of Ecclesiastes was observing the vanity and futility of the monarchy of his day. One of the things that God promises in the gospel is a perfect king who is wiser than Solomon and who never loses his wisdom and who is never replaced by a different king with a different agenda. The vanity that the author of Ecclesiastes is highlighting in our text is that of foolish kings and the temporary nature of the influence of any king or leader. But the good news of God's plan of salvation for the world includes the promise of a king who will be a wise and perfect king and who will rule his people for their wellbeing forever.

So, Isaiah prophesied, "<sup>1</sup>There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. <sup>2</sup>And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord" (Isaiah 11:1-2). The fulfillment of this prophecy is Jesus Christ. He came to bring the kingdom of God. He came to establish the rule of God in his own person. After his death and resurrection, he announced to his disciples and through them to the world, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." And the apostle Paul wrote of him, "in [him] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3).

This king calls us to follow him as our king. He calls us to acknowledge him as king and to submit to him as king. He came to deliver us from our enemies which are Satan, sin and death and he came to rule over his people forever with perfect wisdom and righteousness.

This is the answer to the dilemma posed by the author of Ecclesiastes in our text. The kingdoms of this world have their place, but they are always flawed, always imperfect, always provisional. The kings and

rulers of this world are necessary, but they also cause as many problems as they fix. Human governments can never solve all the problems that need solving. They are part of the problem. And their imperfections should cause us to look for something above and beyond the imperfection and brokenness of everything in this world.

Jesus Christ is the perfect king and he is building a perfect kingdom. He is already at God's right hand and he rules over all with perfect wisdom and righteousness. The calibre of the any king or ruler greatly affects the lives of those over whom he rules. Those who belong to Jesus' kingdom experience the greatest possible wellbeing and blessing because they are ruled by a king who has the power and wisdom to work everything together in their lives for their good.

The Bible has a lot to say about the kingdom of God. It is one of the themes that runs through the whole Bible. It is the story of how God through Jesus defeats the enemies of sin, death and Satan and establishes the kingdom of God. The message includes a summons to enter the kingdom through trust in Jesus as Saviour and submission to his authority as King. And it celebrates the exaltation of Jesus Christ to the right hand of the Father from where he rules over his kingdom.

And because of that we have hope a hope that is based on the calibre of the king. Jesus Christ has the power and the glory and the wisdom to rule his people for their true and eternal wellbeing. God created us with the need to be governed. And in Jesus Christ he has provided the ultimate king. And those who are the subjects of that king experience the blessings of his reign now and forever.