

Every Wrong Made Right in God's Time

Ecclesiastes 3:16-17; 1 Samuel 2:8

January 22, 2006

Rev. Greg L. Price

On a February day in 1688, a young minister (only 26 years old) was led to the scaffold to be hung as a traitor in Edinburgh. There had been placed a bounty upon his head for some time until he was finally captured to the glee of his enemies. Upon his capture, it is written that one of those judges before whom he stood commented about his youthful appearance in these words, "Is this the boy Renwick, that the whole nation was so troubled with?" It is said that the young, faithful, wearied minister replied with only a quiet smile. He faithfully defended the truths of Christ before these wicked judges and was condemned and sentenced to death for them. What was his crime? He preached and taught (among other things) that James II of England neither had the biblical nor constitutional qualifications to rule as king. Mr. Renwick defended to his last breath the biblical and Presbyterian views of church and state as they are found in the Solemn League and Covenant (1643). Before the courts of men he was found to be a condemned traitor, but before the court of God he was found to be a faithful witness. Where was the justice in this sentence to death by these cruel and wicked judges?

Solomon has previously argued that a lasting joy cannot be found in the changing circumstances all about us (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). But now he turns to another reason why joy cannot be found by one who looks to this world for it. How is the Christian able to find the joy of the Lord (when he/she searches for it in this life), when the laws, the constitution, the legislators, and the courts are stacked against him at every turn—when the laws within our nation and the courts within our land defend the wicked and punish the righteous—when civil laws protect the right of every citizen to practice idolatry, blasphemy, covenant-breaking, Sabbath-breaking, murder of the unborn, fornication, adultery, sodomy, and incest (just to name a few)? Solomon wrestled with this question, not so much from a perspective of determining what is lawful civil government and what is not, but more from the perspective of addressing how the child of God can preserve and promote an enduring joy and satisfaction even when the righteous are oppressed, even when the just are persecuted, and even when wickedness is tolerated and promoted at every level of civil government. That seems to be the specific issue being addressed in our text today. The main points from our text are these: (1) Where Is Joy When Injustice Rules in the Courts of Men (Ecclesiastes 3:16)? (2) There Is Joy Because Injustice Shall Be Overruled in the Court of God (Ecclesiastes 3:17).

I. Where Is Joy When Injustice Rules In The Courts Of Men (Ecclesiastes 3:16)?

A. King Solomon being a civil magistrate himself would have had a very unique perspective on the question before us. He says in Ecclesiastes 3:16, "I saw" (that is, he personally observed this injustice of magistrates). He had known very intimately what it was to rule in righteousness in his earlier years of life when he prayed ever so fervently that God would grant him wisdom and knowledge to rule this great people of Israel (2 Chronicles 1:10). Likewise, Solomon knew what it was to rule in unrighteousness in the middle years of his life when he protected and promoted gross idolatry in Israel (1 Kings 11:5-8). Now toward the end of his life, Solomon considers how the joy of the Lord can be maintained and even enlarged when oppression and injustice by magistrates is all about us. Solomon saw how from an earthly perspective ("under the sun") wickedness and iniquity invaded places of authority where judgment (or justice) and righteousness ought to reign.

B. The evils of injustice and oppression by magistrates are often illustrated in Scripture (supremely

in the unjust and wicked condemnation of the blameless Son of God by Pilate). The evils of injustice and oppression are likewise condemned in Scripture (Micah 3:1-4).

C. Why does God care about the way in which magistrates rule? Of what concern is it to Him? The reason that God has a right, not only to care about the way in which magistrates rule, but a right to demand from magistrates obedience to His law is for the following four reasons.

1. God created and formed each and every person—from the first person (Adam) to the last person (Genesis 1:27; Ecclesiastes 11:5). Thus, God has a Divine and indisputable claim to obedience from every man (even magistrates), because He made them.

2. Furthermore, God graciously entered into a Covenant of Works with the first man (Adam) there in the Garden of Eden before the fall of man into sin (Genesis 2:16-17). Adam represented all his descendants (by ordinary generation) as their federal head and as their natural father. In that covenant, Adam was bound to obey God perfectly (which he had the ability to do in that sinless state), and the reward for his obedience would be that he would be confirmed for all eternity in life and righteousness for himself and all his posterity. Adam was also warned that if he disobeyed God, he would justly receive the penalty of death (physical, spiritual, and eternal) for himself and all his posterity. Adam disobeyed and all of his posterity (by ordinary generation) fell with him and sinned in him in his first transgression (Hosea 6:7). The fact that all mankind (regardless of their age, gender, nationality, religion, or social status) are yet bound by that original covenant to perfect obedience (although now due to the fall of man they cannot keep it) argues further that God has a Divine and indisputable claim to obedience from every man (even magistrates), because He covenanted with them in Adam.

3. Moreover, God in His most holy and wise providence raises men to places of power and authority as magistrates (1 Samuel 2:8; John 19:10-11). Every magistrate (even the most wicked and vile tyrants in history) has been placed upon the throne in accordance with God's most wise and holy eternal decree and by means of God's good providence, who works all things for His own glory and for the good of His people. Thus, God has a Divine and indisputable claim to the obedience of every magistrate (regardless of who he is, regardless of his religion or lack thereof, regardless of how he came to power—whether by some elective process or by murder and tyranny), because He ordained their time and place to rule.

4. Finally, God as the moral Judge of all men has in His holy law (both in the law of nature written upon the hearts of all men and in the written law as summarized in the Ten Commandments) given moral qualifications for magistrates and moral statutes by which they are to rule (Romans 13:4—magistrates by office are called “the ministers of God”). The magistrate is not only bound by God's law to uphold and enforce commandments 5-10, which summarize his and our duty to our fellow man, but the magistrate is also bound to uphold and enforce commandments 1-4, which summarize his and our duty to our God. Thus, God has a Divine and indisputable claim to the obedience of every magistrate, because He has given His Moral Law to them in order to rule on His behalf. For that reason magistrates are rightly called “gods” (with a lower case “g”) in Psalm 82 (i.e. they are to rule on behalf of the one true living God). For all of the reasons stated above, it is a grievous crime against God and His supreme dominion for magistrates to ignore, neglect, or resist the Moral Law of Almighty God in their rule. To do so is treason against the supreme authority of God and against Christ who is the Prince of the kings of the earth (Revelation 1:5).

D. How great a temptation it is to abuse the authority and power granted to those who rule (whether in the home, in the church, in the workplace, or in the state). From the time we are very young, most of us have tried to push our weight around by saying, “I'm older, so you have to do what I say”, or “Dad told me, so you have to do what I say.” In fact, the desire to be autonomous and have no one to rule over us is supremely manifested in our rebellion against the Lord Jesus Christ. By nature we want to do what we want to

do because we want to do it. By nature we do not love God, do not love His supreme authority over us or His holy commandments, because these place boundaries around us (good and righteous boundaries). It is only the grace of Christ that can take a rebel and make him a willing and loving subject to God's rule. Sheer force of authority may crush outward resistance in our actions, but only the grace of Christ can crush the inward resistance in our desires. So often those who impatiently hunger and thirst to rule are the very ones that need to patiently wait for God's grace to be evident in their life before they rule. Dear ones, none of us are fit to rule (whether in the home or church) if we have not learned first to submit to the lawful authority God has already placed over us. For, dear ones, authority is a dangerous thing when abused and yet a wonderful blessing from God when used to love and serve others.

E. It is safe to say that no magistrate (no matter how godly he may be) can say he has perfectly exercised his authority in righteousness on behalf of God (as we noted earlier, even Solomon could give ample testimony to this truth by way of his own experience). So it is not every sin or every violation of God's law that disqualifies a magistrate from ruling lawfully. Rather it is an obstinate and willful disregard for God and His law (in the magistrate's official capacity) that makes him morally unfit to rule (yea unlawful to rule on behalf of God). Thus, when a magistrate (in a land enlightened by the gospel) refuses to kiss the Son of God as an act of worship and obedience to His supreme law, that magistrate will be given over to practice oppression and injustice. For he will rule according to popular opinion, or according to the advisers around him, or according to his own selfish desires, rather than ruling according to the just and righteous commandments of the Lord. The magistrate who will not kiss the Son of God will abuse his authority, because he will not rule as God's vice-regent, but as his own man. He will not be able to distinguish between a civil right and a moral wrong, because he has jettisoned the infallible standard (God's Word) as his supreme standard. If I throw away my tape measure and try to build a deck off of your house according to the specifications given to me in a blueprint, how likely is it that the deck I build is going to be even close to the plan without the standard of a tape measure? If even in something as mundane and ordinary as a building project we see the necessity for having a supreme standard to follow, how much more the magistrate must have a supreme and infallible standard (the Scripture) to follow in building and preserving a nation?

F. Now consider very briefly how this injustice by civil magistrates affects your life and mine. This issue is not incidental or unimportant to any of us.

1. Issues of life and death are determined by unjust laws.
 - a. The Supreme Court just upheld a law in Oregon to permit doctors to assist in the suicide of patients who are deemed to have an insufficient quality of life.
 - b. Unborn children are intentionally murdered in the womb. Those people who have suffered brain damage are refused nourishment and hydration.
2. Issues of faith and religion are determined by unjust laws.
 - a. False religions are protected and defended, thus, perverting the truth and leading many to destruction.
 - b. Blasphemy and profanity against Christ and against orthodox Christianity are tolerated and defended in the name of free speech.
 - c. Sabbath-breaking is protected, so that it is a "civil right" to work on the Sabbath if one wants to be open for business. Many of you would not be having the problems you have at work (because you refuse to work on the Sabbath) if ordinary buying and selling were prohibited.
3. Issues of parental authority are determined by unjust laws.
 - a. Parents are intimidated if they want to home school their children and to give them a Christian education.

b. Parents are restrained from taking their children to a faithful church (if one parent happens to disagree).

4. Issues of immorality are determined by unjust laws.

a. Sodomy is defended and promoted as are same sex marriages in various states.

For wherever a crime is tolerated or protected (regardless of the crime), make no mistake that that very sin is being promoted by the civil government. The civil government is not taking a neutral position on anything. There is no neutrality. A magistrate is either for truth, righteousness, and God's Word, or he is against it by the very fact that he does not enact God's law or rule according to it.

b. Fornication and adultery are defended and protected. And even if in some jurisdictions, adultery is still considered a crime, it is either just on the books (and nothing is done about it), or it is treated as no different than jaywalking.

G. So when Solomon addresses this matter of injustice in high places as being an issue that can affect our joy in the Lord, we are taught once again not to look to circumstances or people as the source of our happiness, satisfaction, and contentment. Even those who have the authority to make decisions that can affect your life and mine cannot be looked to for our joy. For injustice, oppression, and wickedness dwell in high places. The civil magistrate cannot make you truly happy. Don't think that if the magistrate lowered your taxes tomorrow that you would have continual joy. Don't think that if the magistrate prevented abortion that you would be filled with a lasting satisfaction. Jesus Christ alone gives a joy that endures the injustice or the persecution that comes from the magistrate. This is the fallacy of so many Christians today who promote change through political agendas. Political agendas do not change people's hearts. Jesus is the joy of man's desiring. In man's heart he knows this to be the case, for God has made man with the knowledge to know that the things of this world cannot bring an everlasting joy and happiness. For, dear ones, God has set eternity in man's heart (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Only the everlasting God can satisfy the deepest desires for joy and contentment in man. And that joy of the Lord can be present in the most perilous times of persecution by tyrants. We are certainly to pray for leaders that they may be humbled, converted, and frame a righteous constitution and righteous laws based upon the supreme authority of God's Moral Law. We are to pray for the benefit of ourselves, our families, and the church that we might live at peace under even unlawful magistrates as long as possible (1 Timothy 2:1-3). But our joy is not in hand of the civil magistrate, any more than it is in any other person or set of circumstances here upon the earth.

II. There Is Joy Because Injustice Shall Be Overruled in the Court of God (Ecclesiastes 3:17).

A. Solomon now gives a certain hope to the children of God that will issue forth in joy as they weigh the injustice all around them. Regardless of the decision rendered by human courts here upon the earth, "God shall judge the righteous and the wicked." Be not overcome with hopelessness and despair when you fall into the hands of injustice, for the final decision has not yet been made, and God will be the one to make it. Although we see in many places in Scripture that God judges the wicked in history and vindicates the righteous in history according to His own holy purposes, the ultimate hope of the Christian is at the judgment seat of Christ. There at the judgment seat of Christ all wrongs will be made right. There at the judgment seat of Christ all injustice will be revealed for what it is. There at the judgment seat of Christ the faithful martyr will be crowned and the wicked tyrant cast into everlasting torment. This hope does not mean that we ought not to strive to use all lawful means to receive justice from those in high places while we yet live here upon the earth. However, when we have used these lawful means to correct injustice, our final court of appeal is with the Lord God Himself, who has promised us that no injustice will escape the fire of His righteous eyes on that final day. This was the hope of the Lord Jesus and that which gave Him joy even in the midst of so many false accusations that were brought against Him, when He was wickedly condemned in the unjust courts of men

(1 Peter 2:20-23).

B. Of course, when we speak of that final judgment, we are also reminded of how each of us (the righteous and the wicked) will stand before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10). The difference between the righteous and the wicked will not be in the fact that some who are judged will have no sin while others will have sin; for all will be shown to have sinned in thought, word, and deed. The difference between the righteous and the wicked will be that the righteous will be publicly acknowledged and acquitted due to the righteousness of Christ that was imputed to them and the forgiveness of God declared to be theirs by the righteous Judge Himself (when they were justified by faith alone). The wicked, on the other hand, will seek to stand before our holy God on that final Day of Judgment on the basis of their own righteousness, and will fall under the everlasting condemnation of the righteous Judge. Dear ones, how the judgment seat of Christ ought to teach us that we cannot be two different people—one kind of person in public and another one in private. God sees us at all times (whether in public or in private), and we act like atheists (as if God does not exist or God does not see) if we willfully live such lives of hypocrisy. How the judgment seat of Christ ought to teach us to be ever so careful how we judge others. For Christ says, “For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again” (Matthew 7:2). James likewise says, “For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shown no mercy” (James 2:13).

C. Young James Renwick, faithful martyr for Christ and His truth, was filled with joy while he awaited his death. He wrote just before his unjust death, “But I must break off, I go to your God and my God. Death is to me as a bed to the weary.” As the drums beat just before he was hung, he cried out, “Yonder is my welcome call to the marriage. The Bridegroom is coming. I am ready.” The courts of men to Renwick were not the final decision. The final decision lay with the court of Christ in heaven.

Copyright 2006 Greg L. Price.