

Chapter 10: Who is Like the Wise?

Ecclesiastes 8:1–17

As we have noted previously, the first half of Ecclesiastes exposes the vanity of false sources of comfort, hope, and satisfaction in this world. The second half of Ecclesiastes, however, is more constructive, working to offer a comprehensive vision for life in a vain world. This does not mean that the Preacher *does* find something in this world, under the sun, that escapes the vanity that plagues everything else. Rather, the Preacher is teaching us critical skills for life in a fallen world. First, he taught us how to discern what is truly and eternally “good” (Eccl. 7:1–14), and then he began to define wisdom as the fear of the Lord (Eccl. 7:15–29). Now, in Ecclesiastes 8, the Preacher continues to expound on the theme of wisdom, with a particular burden on helping us to see what wisdom looks like in various situations, since *God’s wisdom enlightens the eyes*.

Seeing Jeopardy (Eccl. 8:1–9)

Ecclesiastes 8, then, begins with two questions that will frame the whole chapter: “Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?” (v. 1a). These questions are parallel, and addressing the same issue: that is, the *wise* are those who *know the interpretation of a thing*. As Benjamin Shaw explains, “That is one of the benefits of wisdom. It allows one to understand and interpret matters that come to one’s attention. While wisdom will not solve all riddles, it will solve many, and it is to be valued for that.”¹ The Preacher has balanced this evaluation of wisdom throughout his book so far: wisdom can provide an escape from vanity and death (cf. Eccl. 1:16–18; 2:12–17, 21; 6:11–12; 7:11–13, 16), but, even so, wisdom is profoundly valuable and worth our energy to pursue (Eccl. 7:19, 23–25).

Then, the Preacher gives his initial description to answer his questions about the wise: “A man’s wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed” (v. 1b). As Michael Eaton notes, “The shining *face* generally speaks of favour (cf. Num. 6:25). Here it speaks of the wise man who is visibly gracious in his demeanour, and (as the next phrase says) whose gentleness is obvious in his facial expression (contrast Deut. 28:50; Dan. 8:23).”² That is, wisdom so uplifts a person as to give him the kind of shining face that Moses experienced after his encounter with God on Mount Sinai (cf. Ex. 34:29–35). Wisdom enlightens the eyes (Ps. 19:8), and softens the harshness of knowledge that merely puffs up (1 Cor. 8:1). The Preacher’s description here is a vision for living according to wisdom that we ought to pursue.

After this initial vignette of the wise man, the Preacher turns to his practical considerations. He begins with the way in which the wise will interact with a king: “I say: Keep the king’s command,

¹ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 111.

² Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 134.

because of God’s oath to him” (v. 2). It is striking to remember that this is a *king* speaking here (Solomon), although the Preacher does not here remind us of his identity.³ For the rationale, we should note that the ESV adds the phrase “to him.” This is a very difficult verse to translate, but here would be the starkly literal translation: “I: keep the mouth of the king, and upon the matter of the oath of God.” Regarding the final phrase, which gives the rationale, Shaw is probably correct when he writes, “The preposition ‘*al*’ often has the sense of ‘because of.’ So read the second half of the verse, ‘and because of the matter of the oath of God’ (or ‘on account of the oath of God.’) It isn’t good English, but it makes good sense. The man serving the king has taken an oath before God to do so. Therefore, it is incumbent upon him to obey the king, to follow his commands.”⁴

The first place where the Preacher gives us instruction about wisdom, then, is the way in which we should interact with the king. Indeed, our relation to the governing authorities have serious, ongoing, significant implications for our everyday lives, so it is fitting to start here. Derek Kidner writes, “But with the dangerous caprices of a king to reckon with, wisdom has to fold its wings and take the form of discretion, content to keep its possessor out of trouble. It is only the first of its frustrations, and the smallest of them: there is at least something useful it can do in such a setting, whereas later in the chapter it will be faced with problems as intractable as death, moral perversity and the mystery of divine government.”⁵ Particularly, the Preacher teaches us to be mindful of our *motion*: not too quick (to depart from his presence), nor too fixed in place (to stand in an evil cause), “for he does whatever he pleases” (v. 3). In this context, it is likely that the Preacher imagines the one who takes “his stand in an evil cause” is someone who does something evil contrary to the king—that is, who disobeys the commands of a righteous and just king. In contrast, “Whoever keeps a command [i.e., a righteous command from the king] will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way” (v. 5).

Still, this does not mean that a king always does what is right and good (cf. Eccl. 3:16; 4:1, 13). While we must exercise discretion and wisdom in our relation to the king, this does not extend to obeying the king when he commands something evil. The *king* does whatever he pleases, and his word is supreme under the sun. We must be mindful of his great authority, and we may not always be in a position to challenge the king, by asking him to reconsider what he is doing (v. 4). Nevertheless, when in conflict, we must obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29). The Preacher acknowledges that there will eventually be justice, even though we may suffer in this life: “For there is a time and a way for everything, although man’s trouble lies heavy on him” (v. 6). Further, we cannot know the outcome of our actions: “For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?” (v. 7). The wise know what is right and just, especially in the tricky matter of obedience to the king; however, the wise also know that their knowledge of the outcomes of even their best actions is strictly limited.⁶

In v. 8, the Preacher “proceeds to illustrate the ignorance and helplessness of human beings.”⁷ He writes, “No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge

³ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 82–83.

⁴ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 112.

⁵ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 74–75.

⁶ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 146–47.

⁷ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 84.

from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it” (v. 8). We cannot prolong our lives (“retain the spirit”), and, by the same token, we do not have power over the day of our death. We cannot necessarily avoid and end war, and even resorting to wickedness will not deliver us from the calamity that may befall us in life. We are entirely ignorant of what is coming, and of how things will turn out. The Preacher sums up this section by writing, “All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt” (v. 9).

Seeing Judgment (Eccl. 8:10–13)

As with many of the terse, pithy statements of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes, v. 10 is very difficult to translate and interpret. Scholars have given a number of possible translations (D. B. Miller lists six interpretive options that have been suggested), but most readings boil down to either the idea that (1) the wickedness of the wicked continues unchecked in this world, or that (2) at the burial of the wicked, the wicked are unfairly praised, or the righteous are unfairly neglected.⁸ The translation of the ESV captures what seems to best follow the context of the passage as a whole: “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” (v. 10). That is, the Preacher is lamenting the burial of the wicked, who are unfairly praised in the city where they committed their wickedness.

Support for this view comes in the next verse: “Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil” (v. 11). To those watching this vanity, it does not seem that the wicked ever fully pay for their crimes, which, in turn, encourages other people to turn to wickedness as a resort to get ahead.⁹ Now, the Preacher has just finished telling us that “wickedness [will not] deliver those who are given to it” (v. 8). So, the Preacher is not commending wickedness here. On the contrary, there is an implicit warning here that Charles Bridges summarizes well: “Never let it be supposed that God’s patience is the proof, that he thinks lightly of sin. There is indeed a treasure of wrath, and hour by hour, yea—moment by moment—has the impenitent sinner been adding to the heap. How soon the cup may be full! Who knoweth but he may be at this moment exhausting the last drop of the appointed patience of God? We live only by the mere act of grace.”¹⁰

By contrast, the Preacher urges us to fear God, as he did in the previous chapter (Eccl. 7:18): “Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him” (v. 12). Still, the certainty of the punishment of the wicked and of the deliverance of the righteous is not something that we can always observe in this world. Michael Eaton, then, rightly points out the shift in the Preacher’s language from “I see” to “I know”: “It is noteworthy that, whereas the Preacher so often says ‘I have seen...I saw’ (8:9f.), here his reply is introduced by *I know*. The injustices of life are open for all to see; the Preacher’s reply is

⁸ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 148–49.

⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 85.

¹⁰ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 199.

not an observation, but the answer of faith.”¹¹ Therefore, no matter how much it may seem that the wicked get ahead in this life, the Preacher somberly warns us, “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” (v. 13). The Preacher does not spell all of this out, but he clearly alludes to the certainty of a final judgment of the dead.¹²

Seeing Joy (Eccl. 8:14–17)

Even so, the Preacher once again reminds us that it will often appear that the righteous are worse off, while the wicked get ahead: “There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity” (v. 14). God’s final justice is certain and sure, and we must live with a recognition that it will come; however, we must also live with a recognition that, in God’s forbearance, that justice will not immediately and directly right the wrongs we see in this world. So, rather than being distressed trying to bring the *not yet* of final judgment into the *already*, the Preacher advises us to live with a simple joy that embraces the good gifts that come to us in this life: “And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun” (v. 15). As Duane Garrett writes, “The Teacher is not here advocating hedonistic indifference to injustice and suffering, but he does counsel that we come to terms with the limits of our ability to explain (much less eliminate) unjust suffering. Unending vexation over this problem is pointless.”¹³

In addition to joy, the Preacher urges contentedness: “When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one’s eyes see sleep, then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out:” (v. 16–17). We cannot find out the answers we are seeking, and if we insist upon such certainty, we will only find lost sleep (v. 16). Charles Bridges cites a wonderful quotation from Richard Whately: “Too much attention cannot be bestowed on that important—yet much-neglected branch of learning—the knowledge of man’s ignorance.”¹⁴ Part of the shining, softened face of the wise man (cf. v. 1) is that he is not vexed by his inability to discover the answer to certain unsolvable mysteries. Instead, the wise man knows that he is ignorant, and he finds joy and contentedness in that ignorance.

Discussion Questions

1) How would you answer the Preacher’s questions: “Who is like the wise? And who knows the

¹¹ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 140.

¹² Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 77.

¹³ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 330.

¹⁴ From *Detached Thoughts and Aphorisms* in Whately’s Writings; cited in Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 206.

interpretation of a thing?” (v. 1a)? What does the Preacher mean when he says that wisdom makes a man’s face to shine, and to change the hardness of his face (v. 1b)? How would you summarize the overall effects of wisdom in the life of someone? Where is wisdom powerful and helpful? What, though, are the limitations of human wisdom?

2) What danger does a supreme authority pose to human beings (v. 2–4)? If we do not have a king, then who has “power over man to his hurt” (v. 9) in our own society? What wisdom does the Preacher offer about how to interact with the powers that be? While the Preacher encourages us to be careful in our actions toward the king, is he advocating total appeasement to anything and everything that even an evil king would command? Why or why not?

3) What troubles the Preacher about what he sees at the funeral of the wicked (v. 10)? Why is this troubling to him? How does the failure to hold accountable some wicked people help to encourage wickedness in other people? Why, though, should we not give ourselves to wickedness? What is the significance of the Preacher’s saying “I know” instead of “I see” in v. 12? How can we have such confidence in the ultimate justice that God will bring at the final judgment?

4) Why do bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people (v. 14)? How much sense can we make of this? In light of this perplexing situation, why does the Preacher commend “joy” (v. 15)? How much of the “work of God” can we see in this world (v. 17)? Why is it wisdom to know that we cannot find it out? How does such an acknowledgement of limitation and ignorance correlate with the true nature of wisdom?