

Ecclesiastes

Chapter 8

Keep the King's Command

Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed. 2 I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him. 3 Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. 4 For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, "What are you doing?" 5 Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. 6 For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. 7 For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? 8 No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. 9 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.

8:1 *who is like the wise?* Here Solomon praises the wonderful gift of wisdom. His questions in this verse are rhetorical, not really expecting an answer. He's saying something like this: "Who can compare to wise man? Who knows the explanation of things as he does? Wisdom makes for a happy person. "We cannot help comparing this joyful wisdom with that empty worldly wisdom which brings nothing but "much sorrow" (1:18). True wisdom is a bottomless treasure. It is there for the taking in God's Word. (PBC)

knows the interpretation – Many people have a lot of facts at their finger tips or degrees behind their names, but do not have a real grasp of what it all means. The wise man knows that behind life's complexities and seeming injustices, God is at work. He understands that God is using everything for the good of His people. The wise man understands all this and he confidently places his life into God's loving hands. (PBC)

wisdom makes his face shine – His bold air shall be changed to the serenity and dignity of wisdom. Some render this clause thus: "The strength of his countenance," that is, his firm and assured look, "shall be doubled." (CB)

Every field of learning takes on a new light when viewed in this way. History, for instance, becomes more than the recounting of the rise and fall of nations. It is the story of the Almighty's blessings and judgments upon the nations as He carries out His plans. (PBC)

Solomon's father David put it this way, "The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes" (Psalm 19:8). (PBC)

While the unbelieving world is losing itself in feasting and laughter, the wise person is sad. He knows the end of such folly. On the other hand, when everything seems to be going against him, he can rejoice. He knows God is in charge. When Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was put on trial for his life his face was radiant "like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). He was soon to meet his God. (PBC)

hardness – Stern appearance. (TLSB)

changed – Suggesting that in God’s wisdom, one finds mercy. (TLSB)

8:2 *king’s command*. Both principle (v. 2) and prudence (vv. 3–6) set limits on our freedom. (CSB)

Obedience to the civil magistrate is a matter not of human expedience, but of divine authority. We are released from it only when he required what God forbids. (CB)

Because Solomon speaks in general terms in Ecclesiastes, some passages lend themselves to several applications. This is such a passage. The king he speaks of could be either an earthly ruler or the King of kings, that is, God. Since the Hebrew language makes no distinction between small and capital letters, it’s up to the translators to decide on that. The idea of God as King was nothing new at Solomon’s time. In several psalms David had spoken in that manner. For instance, in Psalm 5:2 he wrote, “Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray.” In my opinion Solomon has such a passage in mind. (PBC)

Actually, obedience to God and to human government go hand in hand. The second follows from the first. Luther points out, “Political obedience is included in obedience to God.” The Lord expects His people to respect government authority. “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God” (Romans 13:1-7). (PBC)

God’s oath to him. Of loyalty to the king (as seen, e.g., in 1Ch 29:24). (CSB)

Pictures the king as God’s agent. (TLSB)

An oath before God would be the allegiance that God’s people promise Him. In Deuteronomy 29:12 Moses spoke of such an oath between God and His nation Israel: “You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the Lord your God, a covenant the Lord is making with you this day and sealing with an oath.” Later, at the time of Nehemiah (about 445 BC), the Jews again made “an oath to follow the Law of God” (Nehemiah 10:29). (PBC)

8:3 *be not hasty to go from his presence* – To stand before a king, is to serve him, 1 Kings 12:6; hence to leave his presence is to quit his service. (CB)

Kings might execute those subjects who entered or left their presence without permission (Est 4:10–11). (TLSB)

In ancient times people stood in awe of their rulers. One did not enter or leave a king’s presence without his permission. The expression “to leave the kings’ presence” was another way of saying “to leave without permission.” Simply to turn one’s back on a king and walk out was a terrible insult to the monarch. To do so would invite almost certain death. (PBC)

To leave God’s presence is nothing short of forsaking Him. Genesis 4:16 uses a similar expression when it says that Cain “went out from the Lord’s presence.” To turn against God invites certain and eternal death. (PBC)

Nor dare we turn against our earthly government. “He who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves” (Romans 13:2). (PBC)

stand in an evil cause – This is another warning against opposing the King. (PBC)

8:4 *who can say ... “What are you doing?”* Cf. Isa 45:9; Ro 9:20. (CSB)

If a government functions the way it should, it will punish the evildoer and protect the law-abiding citizen. If not, God will bring that government down in His good time. Governments which foster injustice are sowing the seeds of their own destruction. (PBC)

8:5 *will know no evil* – That is, will not suffer for disobedience. (CB)

proper time and the just way – The right time and the right way of doing a thing. (CB)

8:6 *there is a time and a way* – More literally: “For to every purpose there is a time and judgment.” (CB)

The difficulties we encounter should not drive us to hasty action, especially to reject God or His ways. (TLSB)

man’s trouble. One should put the king’s command above his own misery. (CSB)

The evil of man is great upon him. (CB)

But there is a time for everything (3:1), and at the proper time God will rescue His people. If that deliverance doesn’t come in this life, it will in the next. In the end God saves us from every evil, including those spiritual forces which would oppress and destroy our soul. (PBC)

8:7 *does not know what is to be* – Since it is the plan of God’s providence that we should be ignorant of the future, and subject to disappointment in all our undertakings, we ought to unite, with the wise selection of times and means, a spirit of humble dependence upon Him and patient submission to His sovereign will. (CB)

We can be sure that in the end God will use everything for our good. But in this life we can never be sure of what is coming next. God withholds that information from us, and no one else can give it. Since that’s the case, we should be content, live one day at a time, and entrust everything to God. (PBC)

We might mention in passing that Scripture clearly opposes attempts to discover the future from the stars (horoscopes and astrology) or from fortunetellers. The Prophet Isaiah ridiculed those who look to the stars for guidance. “let your astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month, let them save you from what is coming upon you... They cannot even save themselves” (Isaiah 47:13-14). And speaking of those who turn to fortunetellers who try to consult with spirits of the dead, Isaiah states, “When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this words, they have no light of dawn” (Isaiah 8:19-20). Any attempt to predict the future that is not in line with God’s Word is forbidden. (PBC)

8:8 *no man has power* – The great and the small are alike helpless in the day of death; and ought therefore to be alike humble and diligent in preparing to meet God. (CB)

To lengthen our life beyond what God allows, or to shorten it, is not our decision (Ps 31:15; Jas 4:13–15). (TLSB)

Jesus said, “The wind blows wherever it pleases” (John 3:8). Since the Hebrew word for wind and spirit is the same, Solomon’s statement about the wind might also be translated, “No man has power over his spirit to retain it,” that is, to hold it from leaving the body at the moment of death. (PBC)

Although man can neither predict nor control the events of his life, he can be sure of one thing. Sooner or later he is going to die. Just as no soldier is “discharged in time of war,” so no one escapes the final struggle of death. For the wicked there is no peace. “Wickedness will not release those who practice it.” They must face the consequences – if not in this life then before God who “will call the past to account” (3:15). (PBC)

discharge from war – A war is going on between God and His opponents. Believers, those joined to God’s side, cannot avoid the conflict. (TLSB)

8:9 *applying my heart* – In this section Solomon returns to several topics he has already introduced: oppression, wrongdoing, God’s final justice, and enjoyment of life. The first verse might refer to a person oppressing others “to his own hurt,” or as a footnote of the NIV indicates, “to their hurt.” In the former reading the verse speaks of justice eventually catching up with the oppressor. In the latter it speaks of harm done to others. The actual meaning is “a man lords it over a man to his hurt.” “His” could refer to either party. Both readings fit what Solomon has been saying. (PBC)

8:1–9 No matter in which nation we dwell, we are in the service of the King of heaven and earth and do well only by heeding His Word and by being ready and willing to serve. In our King, we find the hope of things to come and can face the end of life with confidence. • Lord, help us to endure the struggle. You not only know the end already at the beginning, but You also have the outcome securely in hand. Amen. (TLSB)

Those Who Fear God Will Do Well

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. 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. 12 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. 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.

8:10 This text sets up a contrast to vv 12–13 and provides a match for v 14. (TLSB)

the wicked buried. In this context it implies undeserved respect (cf. Job 21:28–33; Lk 16:22). (CSB)

The wicked who had been in power (v-9), and trusted in their wickedness. (CB)

The holy place – Probably from Jerusalem, the place of those consecrated to God’s service. (CB)

It describes them as “those who used to come and go from the holy place, namely, God’s house. Again there are two possible understandings for the verse. Either these wicked people “used to... received praise” or they “are forgotten.” The first points to the unfairness of life under the sun: even in the house of God the wicked receive praise. The other points to the end result of their life: they are forgotten. In the words of Psalm 34:16, “The face of the Lord is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth.” God will see to it that the wicked are forgotten or, if they are remembered, people will not honor them but will want to forget them. Again, either understanding of the verse fits the context of Solomon’s thought. (PBC)

8:11 Delayed punishment tends to induce more wrongdoing. (CSB)

A ruler may delay punishment in order to allow time for repentance, but delay may prompt even more wickedness. (TLSB)

Nowhere does the desperate wickedness of men show itself more clearly, than in the encouragement which they take from God’s gracious forbearance, to harden themselves in iniquity. Thus they turn to their deeper damnation what He gave them for their salvation. (CB)

8:12 *I know.* Here the Teacher speaks from mature faith, not as one “still searching but not finding.” (CSB)

those fear God – Although they may be tempted, they have strong motives for fighting the temptation to indulge themselves in evil. Their faith in God will prevail. (PBC)

8:13 *will not be well with the wicked* – Before the wicked accomplish half of what they set out to do, their end will suddenly come. (PBC)

prolong days like a shadow – Shadows can appear much longer than the person casting them. Yet, shadows vanish at sunset. The long life of the wicked is an illusion that disappears in the light of God’s judgment. (TLSB)

8:10–13 In this life, the wicked may fare better than those who do right. Although we see others getting away with doing wrong, we should not follow them. Instead, we should continue to follow God’s will and commit ourselves to His judgments, which will be favorable to the believer in the end. • God, grant us patience as we see the temporary successes of the ungodly, while we struggle with difficulties and hardships. Also remind us of the final outcome You have prepared for us in Christ. Amen. (TLSB)

Man Cannot Know God's Ways

14 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. **15** 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. **16** 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, **17** 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.

8:14 Job 21–24 enlarges on this; Ps 73 draws the sting of it; and Jn 5:28–29 gives the final explanation. (CSB)

This verse takes a slightly different approach from vv 10–13. Being good and doing right often seem to be useless, more a frustration than a benefit. (TLSB)

Though it will in the end be well with the righteous and ill with the wicked, yet, in respect to the course of events in this world, there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked. Both are alike subject to the sufferings of this present time and to death itself. (CB)

righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds – Godly men like Stephen and Paul are put to death, while tyrants are honored and praised. Because we live in a fallen world, this should not surprise us. Nor should we be bitter. The only person ever to lead a completely life was the most persecuted of all. And He gives this assurance, “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chose³ⁿ you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (John 15:18-19) (PBC)

8:15 *eat ... drink ... be joyful*. Spoken gratefully (see 5:19; 9:7; Dt 8). For such words spoken arrogantly see Lk 12:19–20; 1Co 15:32. (CSB)

Hbr *simchah*, “taking pleasure” in something. *joyful ... will go with him*. Abiding joy finds cause to give thanks to God in any situation. (TLSB)

You’re not going to change the world. Do the best you can to live your faith and share it. And enjoy the gifts God gives you. As you enjoy them, think of how good God is. (PBC)

8:16 *night do one’s eyes see sleep* – “Anxiety: Millions are tormented by this disorder.” So says a modern newspaper headline. The article goes on to relate an example: “The 37year-old mother lay in bed, unable to sleep, shaking with shivers that blankets couldn’t calm. It was her first anxiety attack.” (Milwaukee Journal -12/10/84) As Solomon’s words show, the problem is nothing new. Generations of people have spent countless sleepless nights and troubled days, yet to no avail. Life remains as toilsome and incomprehensible as ever. This is part of God’s doing. He has subjected the fallen world to a condition of frustration. (PBC)

8:17 *saw all the work of God* – Solomon strove to determine what many seek and cannot find, “What has God done in my life, and why?” God’s involvement in our affairs. (TLSB)

man cannot find out. Dt 29:29 sums up what we are allowed and not allowed to know. (CSB)

Even with good speculation about God’s reasons for the events in our lives, we cannot be certain of God’s specific purpose behind each event. (TLSB)

Since God’s judgments are unsearchable, and His ways past finding out, true wisdom lies no in endeavoring to comprehend that which is incomprehensible, but in the cheerful resignation of ourselves to His Will with a believing, loving and obedient spirit. (CB)

Some philosophers might claim to have solved the riddle of life. But what have the world’s wise men ever been able to tell us about the origin, purpose and destiny of life under the sun? “The wisdom of the wise will perish,” declares God, “the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish”

(Isaiah 29:14). The fact that Solomon uses the phrase “under the sun” indicates that he is referring to such worldly wisdom rather than godly wisdom. No human being on his own can discover life’s meaning. God alone can reveal it. (PBC)

8:14–17 Rather than trying to make sense of everything that happens in life, recognize that God’s purpose and plan prevail. Look for reasons to give thanks to Him each day, especially in the mercy He extends to you in Christ. • We thank You, God, that each day You bring evidence of Your involvement in our lives. Lead us to trust Your judgments. Amen. (TLSB)