

Ecclesiastes 8:1-17 | 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.

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.

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.

Ecclesiastes 8 | Before the King

One of my favorite living theologians, John Frame, says that that hardest part of theology is getting your proportions right. Proportion is part of the essence of wisdom, it is the essence of rationality. Ratio is right there in the word. It's what makes coffee and cake good or bad. Both in the making of it and the consuming of it. We however are a simplistic bunch and are often looking for the rule. Yes or no. Do we do the thing or not do the thing. Do I speak or remain silent. Wisdom knows.

Wisdom is a power in the world. But it is not the only power in the world. It must contend with true authorities. With the fickle assessment of crowds and appearances, and finally with its own limits.

1. Authorities

Ecclesiastes 8:1 | 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.

Wisdom shines from the face of the one who has it. Things that shine capture attention and by the attention they have gain authority and therefore express power in the world. The naive think this is plainly good. But the wise understand it is merely a fact to contend with. Throughout our time in the gospel of Mark we noticed Jesus' frequent retreat and demands of secrecy which we named "the divine secret." Christ is the fulness of wisdom but he understands its attributes in perfect proportion. He knows that for shine of wisdom draws the attention of man, and that this is a mixed bag. When he stops his retreat and shines his light, he knows this is the same as marching toward his death at the hand of the crowds.

Ecclesiastes 8:2-4 | 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?"

The shrewd Solomon understands there is a time for wisdom to fold its wings. Sure you may be wise, and in fact wiser than the king, but don't be a fool in your wisdom! God has made an oath to the king, he has granted to all the authorities in your life a true authority which they can weigh to your hurt. There are authorities in your life to which you cannot say, "what are you doing?" It is simply theirs to do. Don't be a fool, God has granted them this authority. You boss thinks some crazy things about Christians? Maybe keep your mouth shut, you've got kids to feed.

Ecclesiastes 8:5-7 | 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?

So should I speak or not speak. If you keep the command of the king it will go well with you. But likewise the wise will know the proper time and the just way. In Acts the apostles refuse compliance with the demands of their rulers to stop preaching the gospel. Here Solomon says, keep the kings commands. Sometimes you should speak up and make fun of the silly things people think. Sometimes you should keep your mouth shut. But in either case you won't know for certain what will be effective. Don't overestimate the effective application of your wisdom. You can't tell how it will be. Wisdom shines and gathers attention. Sometimes wisdom requires disobeying the king. Sometimes it requires dimming down the shine in the presence of the king. Ratios. Coffee & cake.

Ecclesiastes 8:8-9 | 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.

There is one certainty that Solomon draws us back towards although it is hardly a comfort. No matter what you don't have power to preserve your spirit. Death is the only certainty. Not even the retreat from wisdom into wickedness will allow you to prevent death. Solomon sees this in the world he observed under the sun, a world in which man has power to lord over other men to their hurt.

2. Crowds & Appearances

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.

Here again the right judgement of the wise is somewhat of a liability in a world of unequally distributed power. Solomon sees the wicked buried. That seems good. But it's not so simple. The wicked used to go in and out of her holy place and they were praised in the city where they had done such wicked things. There is a particular wickedness that aligns itself with faith in order to conceal someone's true wickedness. The crowds couldn't tell and the wicked were celebrated. Solomon spots a reason for this.

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.

Part of it is simply timing. The sentence against evil is too long, so people mistake God's patience for indifference. The heart of man sets itself towards evil all the time under the patience of God. But Solomon breaks through and hints at something hidden from under the sun. Afterlife.

Ecclesiastes 8:12-13 | 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.

There is a truth he knows that he must make known. Even if all the evidence of the world is that there is no justice for the evildoer, Solomon knows better. It will not be well with the wicked and it will be well with those who fear God. In both cases the difference is because they fear the Lord. If you don't fear the Lord it will go badly for you. If you fear the Lord it will be well. The defining feature is whether or not you fear the Lord. There is a judge that will reveal all the false judgements of wicked men by the crowds. God will judge and he will know whether or not you heard him.

3. Joy by Faith

Ecclesiastes 8:14 | 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.

He returns to the point he made last week. Sometimes it goes terribly for the righteous and goes well for the wicked. The world is inverted and untrustworthy. But this is vapor. He has already broken through and shown us that there will be a final judgement and a true justice under God. The vapor is imbed gain good news. It means this upside down unjust world will come to an end and be set right. The Vapor is double edged.

Ecclesiastes 8:15 | 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.

Once again in light of this vapor, Solomon commends the simple satisfactions. But Solomon does not overstate their power. These simple satisfactions will go with you in your toil. You should be able to hold your life in proportion. There is toil in your life. But it isn't all toil. There's lunch. Sometimes there are snacks. Your problems won't last forever. Injustice in the world is vapor.

Ecclesiastes 8:16-17 | 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.

The joy is good. But don't mistake it for the meaning of life. The meaning of life isn't out here. You can't find it. Your wisdom makes your face shine, but it doesn't work everywhere and it is insufficient for solving the ultimate riddles of the life you're in. You're well crafted and timed sentences might not work. But don't be a fool.

Notice it is all the work of God. You are not in a tale told by an idiot. Even if it is told to an idiot. But the longing to know is a hint in itself, one we've been given the reason for and have hints at its resolution. Eternity is in your heart. And Solomon has shown us God will judge if we fear him, and there is an afterlife. Live by faith and fear of God. Because there is a true king that you will stand before. One who knows true justice and will judge rightly. And he will reward the righteous and punish the wicked. This is the Lord Jesus Christ. Fear him.

