

# Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament

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## Chapter 8

### Wisdom Has Its Limits

By **application**, the Preacher **found the explanation for apparent inequalities in divine providence** (6:1–8:15).

The topic of wisdom brackets chapter 8 with two declarations about **“the wise man”** (vv. 1, 17). Verse 1 speaks again to the rarity of the truly wise person (7:27–28); verse 17 announces the frustration of the wise person who says, “I know,” but cannot comprehend all the work of God “under the sun.” Wisdom has its benefits (v. 1b), but it also has its limits (v. 17).

#### Wisdom in Situations beyond a Person's Control (vv. 1–9)

Verse 1 serves as a transition between chapters 7 and 8. Whether it concludes chapter 7 or commences chapter 8, the verse serves as a “hinge”<sup>1</sup> between the two. **Rhetorical questions** like those in the first half of verse 1 normally receive a negative answer. The questions anticipate “no one knows” (v. 7) and the reference to those who think they know, but have not come to a full comprehension of all that God does (v. 17).<sup>2</sup> However, in the second half of the verse Solomon answers by indicating that such individuals do exist—despite their rarity (cf. 7:28).

A wise person possesses the ability to interpret<sup>3</sup> a matter and its resulting calm assurance produces **a radiant countenance** (v. 1b). Similar terminology occurs in the Aaronic blessing: “The LORD make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you” (Num 6:25; cp. Ps 4:6). The context indicates that the shining face refers to God's favor, grace, and mercy (cf. Ps 67:1). Proverbs 16:15 applies the metaphor to human beings (“In the light of a king's face is life, And his favor is like a cloud with the spring rain”). Ecclesiastes 8:1 concludes with the statement that a person's wisdom **“causes his stern**

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<sup>1</sup> Cp. Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 351.

<sup>2</sup> C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 290.

<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word for “interpretation” (*peshet*) occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible, but it appears often in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

**face to beam**” (literally, “the strength of his face changes”). Wisdom softens one’s face as a reflection of the softened heart (cp. Prov 15:13). In other words, that individual becomes more gracious, merciful, and forgiving.<sup>4</sup>

In 7:15–29 Solomon had exhorted his readers to be forgiving of those who have spoken ill of them (7:21). Now, in 8:1, he offers a fuller explanation of what transpires in the exhibition of that **forgiving spirit**. Since chapters 7 and 8 depict wisdom as something desirable and positive, Longman’s view of 8:1 “as a sarcastic exclamation of frustration”<sup>5</sup> finds no objective basis in the text itself (though 7:23, 24 seem to conclude that wisdom is unattainable).

Some commentators question Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes in view of instruction regarding kings in 8:2–9.<sup>6</sup> The verses seem to present kings in a negative light. **Would King Solomon speak in such a manner?** However, who better to expound on practical politics in the royal court than a king? His advice resounds with credibility gained from firsthand experience on the throne and with other sovereigns. Fredericks declares that a royal perspective pervades Ecclesiastes, but that both exilic and post-exilic periods of Israel’s history provide very little opportunity for applying wise instruction regarding the monarchy’s operations. “There was no monarchy!”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Solomonic authorship contributes to the authenticity of these instructions and observations.

### **Being Wise in a King’s Throne Room (vv. 2–6)**

First, the writer of Ecclesiastes advises his readers to **submit to the king (v. 2)**. Does Solomon refer to a human monarch or to the divine King? Leupold believes that verses 1–8 speak of “the heavenly Monarch, . . . more aptly than it does to an earthly ruler.”<sup>8</sup> While this interpretation nullifies one argument often used against Solomonic authorship,<sup>9</sup> it does not do justice to the text. Parallels with Proverbs also connect wisdom with behavior in a king’s presence. Opening the instruction with “**I say**” (literally, “I—no verb<sup>10</sup>) echoes 6:3 and 8:14. Submission to royal authority finds its basis in “**the oath of God**” (literal translation). The phrase contains some grammatical ambiguity, since the genitive can mean an oath that God takes or gives (ESV),<sup>11</sup> an oath characterized by God (“sacred oath,” NRSV), or an oath taken to God (NKJV) or before God (NASB, NIV).

<sup>4</sup> Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 117. On the other hand, Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary 14 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 326 fns 183 and 184, considers “his face” a reference to the king, mentioned in the following verse.

<sup>5</sup> Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 208. Even Longman notes that such an interpretation is “hypothetical because it is the context, rather than anything explicit in the text, that signals the sarcastic tone” (ibid. 209).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 6, 209.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel C. Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs*, by Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, *Apollos Old Testament Commentary* 16 (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2010), 32.

<sup>8</sup> H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), 180.

<sup>9</sup> Leupold, however, dates the book to the Persian period; ibid., 11, 183.

<sup>10</sup> An alternate translation: “As for me, the rule is ‘Keep the king’s command.’” Cp. 1 Sam 12:14, “[do] not rebel against the command of the LORD” (literally, “the mouth of the LORD”).

<sup>11</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 185, believes that the oath refers to God’s promise to David that his descendants would sit on the throne of Israel.

The last offers the most likely meaning. With God as witness, subjects make their oath of allegiance to their sovereign (cp. Exod 22:11; 2 Sam 21:7; 1 Kgs 2:43; 1 Chron 29:24). Solomon exhorts people to be faithful in their sworn allegiance to their king.

**Verse 3** continues the exhortation to allegiance and submission. Subjects should not hastily depart from the king's presence. One should wait to be dismissed by the king himself. A person should demonstrate that their business does not transcend the king's and that their time is at his pleasure. Indeed, if one makes an untimely exit, he or she might lose an opportunity to influence the king.<sup>12</sup>

People also must beware of getting involved in any matter that the king might find displeasing. In other words, they should not engage in a "bad cause" (NIV, HCSB). The king will punish any appearance of evil, lack of submission, rebellion, or improprieties as he sees fit (cf. Prov 14:35; 24:21–22). **Verse 4** warns about arguing with the king or demanding an explanation for his decisions. The rhetorical question ("**who will say to him, 'What are you doing?'**") demands a negative response, "No one" (cp. Job 9:12; Isa 45:9). God, king, and potter exercise similar power over their subjects. Obedience to royal decrees keeps one out of trouble with the king (v. 5a; cf. Prov 16:14; 19:12; 20:2). A citizen must employ the correct process at the proper time to present any disagreement or grievance (v. 5b).

The mention of a proper time (v. 5) brings attention to other issues involving timing (vv. 6–8). "There is a proper time . . . for every delight" (v. 6) closely reproduces "a time for every matter" in 3:1. In contexts dealing with time, translators tend to render "delight" as "matter" (3:1, 17). In contexts speaking of being pleased, they translate it as "delight" (5:3). Since 8:6 is close to 3:1 in wording, it would seem more appropriate to translate it as "matter": "**For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter.**" It fits the context better, because the topic concerns how to live under the authority of a king. The final clause of verse 6 further clarifies the intent: "**though a man's trouble is heavy upon him**" (literally, "though the trouble of that person is plentiful [abundant] upon him"). The phrasing echoes Genesis 6:5 ("the wickedness of man was great"). This might imply that an individual's trouble stems, at least originally, from his own sinfulness (see Eccl 7:29). No matter how many troubles the royal subject experiences due to the king's decrees, he or she must not rush the matter or commit an error in approaching the king improperly for much needed relief.<sup>13</sup>

### **Inability to Control Life's Circumstances (vv. 7–9)**

Next, mention of proper timing and the troubles which people face "under the sun" brings up mankind's lack of knowledge about the future (v. 7). No one knows the future, so no one can explain to someone else what will happen. The identical phrase for "**what will happen**" appears in 1:9; 3:22; and 10:14. All speak of an unknown future. Only God has the power to declare the future (see Isa 46:10–11).

Mankind's apparent helplessness with regard to the future relates to other matters "under the sun" over which no individual has control. In **verse 8**, Solomon offers **four examples** of an individual's lack of control over life: **(1)** no one can restrain the wind with the wind (cp. Prov 27:16), **(2)** no one can control the day of his or her death, **(3)** no

<sup>12</sup> Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 326–27.

<sup>13</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 120, identifies the trouble with the general theme of Ecclesiastes—the oppressive burdens of life itself.

soldier can discharge himself in time of war, and (4) wicked deeds can never deliver evil doers.<sup>14</sup> Ambiguity creates difficulty in interpreting and translating the first of these examples. “**Wind**” is the same word (*ruach*) translated “breath” (3:19, 21) and “spirit” (7:8; 12:7). If the author’s intent was “spirit,” it would mean that no one can prevent the departure of his or her spirit.<sup>15</sup> It would fit with the second example speaking of inability to prevent death. Taking the first two clauses as references to death seems incongruous with a **numerical saying proverb** in which the reader expects four different items.<sup>16</sup>

The final illustration provides an interesting insight. Literally, the text reads, “**wickedness will not deliver its masters.**” Those who practice evil have mastered its character and actions. But even evil’s masters remain helpless and subject to God’s authority. All four of these illustrations add to verse 7 and expand the picture of human inability to control their circumstances. The realms include the future, climate, death, war, and salvation. **All of these are outside mankind’s control.** Only God controls all of these things.

Solomon concludes this first section of chapter 8 by referring to his pursuit of wisdom regarding life “under the sun” (v. 9). He has given his mind to every deed performed in this life by which people might exercise authority over someone else for ill. This is the same issue he addresses in 7:20 and 29. Fallen humanity perverts the right ways of God. **Men and women are sinners.** They tend to use authority to perform evil against their fellow man. Fallen humanity cannot change, cannot deliver, cannot contravene the decrees of God, and cannot avoid death. The “wherein” of some translations (NASB) actually reads “a time which” (HCSB, NKJV) or “while” (NRSV). It is the same word occurring 29 times in chapter 3 as well as 8:5 and 6. The duration of life “under the sun” constitutes a person’s “**time**” when he might utilize exercise authority.

Swindoll summarizes **five characteristics of a wise leader** from verses 1–8: a **clear mind** (v. 1a), a **cheerful disposition** (v. 1b), a **discreet mouth** (vv. 2–4), **keen judgment** (vv. 5–7), and a **humble spirit** (v. 8).<sup>17</sup> What about your spiritual journey? Is Solomon the only person to face his wisdom’s limitations? Does God expect only Solomon to model godly wisdom?

### **Being Wise in God’s Throne Room (vv. 10–17)**

Some commentators consider **verse 10** the most difficult in Ecclesiastes.<sup>18</sup> Solomon speaks again of what he has seen (vv. 9, 10). He observed wicked people being buried (cp. 7:1, 2). Those same wicked individuals dared to enter the “**holy place**” (probably the Temple)<sup>19</sup> where they mingled with believers. They did not live up to the impressions

<sup>14</sup> Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 283, observes that the statement depicts a bondage of a person’s will to evil.

<sup>15</sup> Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 189, takes this verse as a reference “to keeping back a spirit that is about to depart from the earthly tabernacle of this body.”

<sup>16</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 213 fn 27.

<sup>17</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge: Coming to Terms with Reality* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 237–47.

<sup>18</sup> Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 218, “certainty eludes every honest interpreter, even though the problems are often hidden behind smooth English translations.”

<sup>19</sup> R. N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 135. Garrett prefers “funeral” as a paraphrase for “holy place”; Garrett,

they conveyed in the holy place. What good did it do them? They are dead, buried, and forgotten.<sup>20</sup> Their works, whether evil or good, appear to count as nothing. This is the ultimate meaning of “evil will not deliver those who practice it” (v. 8d). They did not obtain a good reputation (7:1; cp. Prov 10:7) and their fellow citizens (and fellow worshippers) soon forget them. **“This too is futility [*hebel*],”** Solomon declares.<sup>21</sup>

Because of the sluggish pace of the legal system, the law loses its power to dissuade people from evil. Solomon observes that people give themselves more fully to committing evil deeds when **“the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly”** (v. 11). Deniers of Solomonic authorship point out that Solomon, as king, had control over the pace of justice. Why complain about something over which he himself had control? He did not make every legal decision. Like all kings he delegated authority in lesser cases to other leaders (see 5:8). Some failed to expedite justice or were slowed in the process by accepting bribes (cp. 7:7). All such injustice comes about because of the fallen nature of humanity.

In **verse 12** Solomon observes that an evil person might have the opportunity to commit an act of evil 100 times and still live a long time. In the light of verse 11, it appears that he attributes to God the same delay in justice that is so evident in human courts of law. But Solomon declares, **“still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly.”** Notice the departure from the writer’s usual “I have seen.” This truth he knows by conviction and holds by faith.<sup>22</sup> A true God-fearer goes through life more conscious of what God thinks or knows, than of what people might think or know.

An evil person’s major problem consists of the lack of any fear of God (v. 13). In verse 12 a sinner “may lengthen his *life*,” but in verse 13 the wicked “will not lengthen his days.” Kidner, observing this conflict suggests that the first refers to physical life and the latter subtly raises the matter of an after-life for godly individuals: “This could mean that whereas the godly man has hope beyond the grave, the ungodly has none: however long postponed, death will be the end for him.”<sup>23</sup> **“Like a shadow”** probably refers to the way that shadows become exceedingly long late in the day. Barton takes that figure to indicate that “sinners never reach the evening of life.”<sup>24</sup> **Malachi 3:13–4:3** replicates these same themes: the seeming futility of serving God when the wicked appear to

*Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 328–29 fn 199. Ernest W. Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (1869; repr., Minneapolis: James and Klock Christian Publishing, 1977), 200, concludes that “the holy” indicates “ideal persons” (the righteous).

<sup>20</sup> Commentators suggest a number of emendations for “forgotten” in an attempt to eliminate the difficulty of speaking of the forgetting of the wicked as something negative, when it would seem to be a good thing. Thus, one emendation uses “praised,” which a reader could more readily take as a cause for the frustration of the righteous; Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 329 fn 200. Another solution retains “forgotten,” but inserts “the righteous” as the object; Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary 23A (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 85. The contrast then rests between the wicked being buried with honor and the righteous being forgotten.

<sup>21</sup> “This is *hebel*” occurs in 2:15, 19, 21; 2:23, 26; 4:4, 8, 16; 5:10 [Heb., 9]; 6:2, 9; 7:6; and 8:14.

<sup>22</sup> Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 123.

<sup>23</sup> Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance: Ecclesiastes & the Way of the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 77. He refers to Pss 49:14–15 and 73:18–20 for the same concept of an after-life. Likewise, Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 123.

<sup>24</sup> George Aaron Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, International Critical Commentary (1908; reprint, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1971), 154; Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 220.

prosper (3:13–15), the contrast between those who fear God and those who do not (3:16–18), and the future judgment of the wicked (4:1–3). The double reference to “futility” (*hebel*) in **verse 14** sets the stage for a summary like that in 7:15.

**Verse 15** reveals the **third *carpe diem* text** declaring that life is the gift of God (see 2:24–26; 5:18–20). “**Commend**” conveys the concept of a strong recommendation.<sup>25</sup> However, Solomon does not advise enjoyment of life as an anesthetic to deaden the pain of inequity, injustice, and death. His point is that human beings ought not waste their God-given joys by seeking to usurp the authority or work of the Creator. **Fretting over the brevity and seeming unfairness of life brings no joy, no peace, no rest, and no solution.** God’s wise bestowment of all things stands behind all that happens “under the sun.” No one can understand the ultimate reasons for what happens, because even the wisest is but a fool by comparison to God. We should not beat our “heads against the wall trying to figure out life.”<sup>26</sup> An impressive continuity exists between Solomon’s teaching and that of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (**Matt 6:25–34**).

Solomon reviews his pursuit of wisdom in **verses 16–17** (cp. 1:13). In his search for wisdom he could eliminate sleep and still not succeed (v. 16). Interestingly, his earlier speech concerning labor with wisdom (2:18–23) includes the observation that the mind of the wise laborer (v. 21) has no rest even at night (v. 23).

The “**work of God**” serves as the object of Solomon’s observation (8:17; cp. 3:11, 14; 7:13, 29). However, humans are incapable of discovering all of God’s work “under the sun.” Whether the search involves God’s work in the past (7:24) or the future (7:14), it will elude the searcher. Paul writes similarly when examining the mercy of God in **Romans 11:33–36**. “How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (v. 33b). His statement does not reflect skepticism, neither does Solomon’s.<sup>27</sup>

Chapter 8’s conclusion reverberates in the words of **1 Corinthians 1:20–25**. Human wisdom cannot save anyone from their inability to control their circumstances or from their inherited sinful nature. Only God’s wisdom meets this task. God displays His wisdom in the person of the Messiah Himself. The ultimate answer to Solomon’s questions comes in the person and work of Jesus Christ. *Ecclesiastes* removes all claims to the salvific value of human wisdom. This book prepares the human heart for the greater message of redemption. No one can turn to the Redeemer until they first recognizes their own inability to do anything for themselves.

The final chapters of *Ecclesiastes* pick up from the message of 8:16–17 and point the reader toward God, the Maker or Creator, who alone controls life “under the sun.”

### Questions for study:

- What produces greater graciousness and forgiveness in believers?
- How should believers conduct themselves before government leaders?
- Over what things do we have no control?
- How does Solomon “know” what he knows in verse 12?
- What does fretting over inequities and injustices and inabilities say about one’s relationship to their Creator?

<sup>25</sup> Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 291.

<sup>26</sup> Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*, 356.

<sup>27</sup> *Contra* Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 223.