



## LESSON 9 | WISDOM IN A DANGEROUS WORLD (8:1-17)<sup>1</sup>

One of the recurring themes of Ecclesiastes is the Teacher's search for righteousness and justice on earth. What he finds more often than not, is that the wicked prosper while the righteous are afflicted. Often this injustice is dealt by the hand of one in a position of authority. Recall that since the beginning of chapter 7, the Teacher has given instruction on how to live well and wise in an unjust world. In chapter 8, he recommends how to live under a powerful, unpredictable king. His advice is to use wisdom when dealing with authorities in this wicked world – to act with caution, patience, and integrity. The wise will know the proper time and place to speak up and when to keep silent before earthly rulers.

Wisdom indeed helps us survive in a dangerous, unjust world, but the Teacher reminds us again there are limits to wisdom. Wisdom does not enable us to find out all the works of God, nor does it tell us how justice will be achieved and precisely how. In the long term, therefore, wisdom teaches us that it is “better” to fear God and to live a life of integrity and contentment. For there is nothing “better” for someone living in the present time than to eat, drink, and be glad—to know joy in the presence of God throughout this life that God gives to us (8:15).

### **Wisdom in a Dangerous World (8:1-9)**

*Summary: Wisdom teaches one how to act in the king's presence by learning what is fitting in different situations, but the Teacher in 8:1–9 reflects on the value of such wisdom in the context of the absolute power of a king. He envisions the king's word as supreme, and no one holds him accountable. This opens wide the gate for oppression and all the problems that accompany it, so that those in power lord it over another's detriment (v. 9). If this is how life “under the sun” works, those who are wise will exercise caution and patience.*

**8:1-2.** The Teacher advises that one keep the command of the king as if it were an oath to God, and we know from 5:1–7 that this is therefore to be taken with full seriousness. Being wise in the presence of a king should entail respect but *also* the freedom to give sound advice. But as far as the Teacher can see, the king is accountable to no one; there is no one to interrogate him about what he is doing. Once the king's power is regarded as absolute, as v. 2 implies, then any difference of opinion with him becomes dangerous. In such a situation, the “wise” thing to do is never to oppose the king.

**8:3-4.** Verse 3 provides balanced advice to the wise on how to react to a foolish command. One should not storm out of the king's presence in a rage, but neither should one stick around in a bad situation. After all, as the Teacher observes, the king's “word is supreme” — so no one can say to him, “What are you doing?” (v. 4).

Taken together these verses advocate withdrawal from the royal court rather than opposing the king. The wise man will think more than twice before opposing the king in this way. He will not rush to speech and action. At any sign of opposition from the king, therefore, one should stop and get out of the king's presence fast— for the power of the king is absolute: he will do whatever he pleases and no one will call him to task. From this perspective, the Teacher implies that traditional wisdom just does not work, because any opposition to the king will have bad personal consequences—and anyway, the king will do what he wants.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lesson notes are adapted from Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes (NIVAC)*, (150-57) and Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, (284-290)

**8:5-6.** The Teacher counsels **caution** when confronting power, for although that power in relation to God is no power at all, it is still capable of doing great harm. A wise person may well be “more powerful than ten rulers in a city” (7:19); but he is unwise if he thinks that wisdom gives him precisely the same kind of power as the king, and he is likely to regret it if he fails to make the appropriate distinction between them.

- The way to “come to no harm” is to “know” the “proper time and procedure” for everything (v.v 5-6) — as chapter 3 reminded us. In 5:8, moreover, we have been told that we should not be surprised by “such things” as the denial of justice and rights.
- Taking these passages as our guide, it seems best to interpret 8:5-6 as calling the wise man faced with a foolish ruler to exercise restraint rather than to give free rein to his true feelings—to remember that there is a time for everything, including divine judgment on foolishness and wickedness, even for kings.
- What the Teacher is saying here comes under the New Testament ideal of being “as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves,” precisely because as sheep it is not wise to attract attention from any wolves (Matt. 10:16). There is no virtue in running deliberately into the jaws of death for no good reason.

**8:7-9.** Just as the Teacher advised **caution** in the previous section, he now counsels **patience**. The wise person who understands the nature of things will not struggle foolishly against reality as it is presently found, as if an individual could singlehandedly change the world for the better. These truths are general ones that might apply to anyone, and in particular to the wise person, who may be tempted to think that they can change things by their words and actions that cannot in fact be changed at the time.

- Verse 7 reaffirms the lack of control that human beings have over “the times” (cf. ch. 3). The wise “know” about “time and judgment” (v. 5), and this influences both their thinking and their actions when confronted by the king, but no one “knows” exactly how and when things will work out (v. 7). Various images of human lack of control are then given in verse 8 to underline the point.
- There must be a steady and a patient waiting for God’s judgment and redemption, knowing that, as 2 Pet. 3:8-9 puts it: “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”
- This **patience** is naturally linked to **faith**. It is necessary to keep our heads clear when confronted by the idols of power, lest we come to think that the claims of powerful leaders have some basis in reality, and lest we are tempted therefore to view the world from their point of view. The present nature of the world should not determine our thinking. We should not be persuaded by those who follow their own evil desires. The wicked will face judgment, and “their days will not lengthen like a shadow” (Eccl. 8:13).

### **Wickedness Does(n’t) Pay (8:10-13)**

*Summary: Whereas the previous section focused on the relevance of traditional wisdom when dealing with corrupt leaders, this section picks up the theme of vv. 6-7: there is a time for judgment, but we do not know if or when it will happen. Traditional wisdom may teach that there is a time and a place for judgment and justice (v. 6), but what if our observation contradicts this and we see justice endlessly delayed? This is the problem the Teacher moves on to in this section, which deals with the problem of the wicked not being speedily punished.*

**8:10.** In the end, the reign of the wicked person comes to an end — even the wicked are buried (v. 10). As prominent, visible, and perhaps self-righteous as kings once were (symbolized by their coming and going from the temple) — they too die, are buried, and are soon forgotten even in the city where they were most visible and well known. Their reign is not so imposing as they think. Even the memory of it soon fades.

**8:11.** The final sentence of verse 10, referring to what is “meaningless,” is better taken with what follows in v.11. The problem with delayed judgment is that it encourages evil. The Teacher has seen the consequences of their actions during their life. Wrongdoing meets no opposition, and the wrongdoer is thus encouraged to continue on his or her chosen path. It is this way of thinking and doing that is “meaningless.”

**8:12-13.** Now we hear the confessional voice of the Teacher in relation to the time for judgment, and here he specifically has God’s judgment in mind. In v. 12 he confesses what he “knows” about God’s justice despite the prolonging of sinners’ lives. Even though a sinner sins continually and lives a long life, the Teacher knows that it will be well with the one who fears God.

- The confession continues in v. 13 but with an important shift. In contrast to the one who fears God, it will not be well with the wicked and their days will not be long, because they do not fear God. **The Teacher continues to affirm that it will go better with the person who fears God than with the person who does not, and he states that the days of the wicked will not last as long as they seem.**

### **A Strong Recommendation (8:14-17)**

- In 8:15 we hear once again the confessional voice of the Teacher that resonates with the previous *carpe diem* passages. He recommends joy, for there is nothing better than eating, drinking, and rejoicing, for this will accompany one in one’s labor under the sun. The verb “recommend” can also mean “laud” or “praise,” so that we have here a strong recommendation from the Teacher.
- Once again this recommendation of joy is juxtaposed in contradictory fashion (here with v. 14). How, one might ask, can the Teacher recommend joy when the righteous are being treated as if wicked and the wicked as righteous? A gap is opened in the reading, and it is not resolved. Again it evokes the tension the Teacher experiences between what he observes and what he “knows.”
- It is ultimately unclear how justice is to be achieved and precisely how, but in the long term, at least this much is clear: **(1) The Teacher knows it is “better” to fear God than not to, and (2) There is nothing “better” for someone living in the present time “under the sun” than to eat, drink, and be glad—to know joy in the presence of God in this world (v.15).** The business of living well before God in this way must not be sacrificed in the pursuit of truth that is ultimately beyond our grasp.
- In addition to **caution** and **patience**, the Teacher counsels us to pursue lives of **integrity**. Above all we must not be drawn into living falsely just because we live in a world where falsehood is normal. **We are to go on living our lives before God, eating and drinking and being glad, and in doing this undermining all the ways of thinking that exalt power as a means to human happiness.** We are to stay on the narrow path, refusing the temptations and ignoring the threats of power.

We do this, not because we understand all of God’s ways, but because we know that God is God (8:16–17). With these closing verses of chapter 8 we return to the theme of much of the second part of chapter 7:

1. The Teacher has set out to understand the work of life at which human beings are constantly busy (“not seeing sleep day or night” v. 16).
2. He has examined the work of God (v. 17), and, as in 3:11,17 (where God’s work of judgment is in view), he has found it unfathomable.
3. All efforts at knowing wisdom (v. 16, as in 7:25), in the sense of “finding” a comprehensive account of reality have failed. “Despite all human effort to search it out, no one can discover its meaning” (v.17)

It is this reality that leads to the advice of verse 15. It's not the ultimate justice of God that the Teacher doubts. It's his own ability to understand how that justice works out in practice. He does not consider it wise to pursue that question at the expense of living well the life God has given him.

## REFLECTIONS & CONNECTIONS

- Reflecting on 8:1-9, we see that shrewd caution, patient faith, and integrity are all on display when we read many biblical stories that are most directly about God's people living under foreign rule. In the Old Testament we think most notably of the story of Joseph in Genesis and of the books of Esther and Daniel. The Joseph and Esther stories remind us that living under such rule is frequently complex and certainly not morally unambiguous—there is always a fine line between accommodation and compromise. The Daniel stories tell us something that the Teacher does not: that even when the people of God make a sincere attempt to live under the “evil empires,” displaying respect to governmental power and exercising caution, faith, and integrity, they will still face persecution and danger and will sometimes be called upon to stand up and be counted for God.
- Even though wise people have no interest in running deliberately into conflict with the powers of this world for no good reason, there will sometimes be good reasons to do so. For God is God, and **loyalty to God comes first and above all other loyalties**. The early church preaches the same message to us: “**We must obey God rather than men**” (Acts 5:29). Christians have always struggled with what exactly this means. What is clear, however, is that those who hold to faith in God can never agree to any human demand that they blur the sharp boundary between our fidelity to God and anything else that calls for our ultimate allegiance, whether that demand comes from a government or any other person or community.
- There is no place in Christian thinking for any “God and...” — “*God and...*” is *idolatry*. One of the most serious of these idolatries is “God and country.” It has milder and stronger forms. In its milder form, there is only a subtle but dangerous elevation of one's nation to a position in one's life in which it is spoken of in the same breath as God. It is only a short step to the stronger and more deadly form, however, in which God is enlisted in exclusive support of one's country, one's culture, and one's way of life; and it is assumed that to be Christian is to be, for example, American. The whole earth is the Lord's (Ps 24:1), and God has no interest in artificial human barriers and boundaries, nor does he have any intention of being used to legitimate them.
- The biblical writers assume a distance between Christians and their culture or society—an alienation and a discomfort, at least, with the situation. They counsel due respect for authority, up to a point, and advocate caution and patience, but they do so in the assumption that sooner or later conflict will arise, at which time the worshipers of the living God will have to name as idols what others think of as gods. We are always citizens of the kingdom of God first and citizens of our state second; and we are always to live in a way different from those who worship the idols of power and Mammon.
- **As for 8:10-17, the problem of oppression and delayed judgment remains in our time.** There is no easy solution to this sort of problem, hence the enduring relevance of Ecclesiastes. By faith the Christian believes that the day of judgment will come and that justice will finally be done, as the Teacher confesses in 8:12-13. This remains a confession of faith and one that the experiences of life challenge again and again as judgment is delayed and the worst forms of evil flourish. Like us, the Teacher confesses that God's judgment will set matters right, but there is still the question of how to live the present. That remains unresolved for the Teacher.
- The New Testament helps with its much fuller revelation of the end times, when justice will roll down like the waters, and with its teaching of resurrection. There will be a time of judgment when rulers will give an account of their deeds and receive just compensation. Nevertheless, being wise in an oppressive context such as that described by the Teacher in this chapter can be very costly if one refuses to acquiesce to abusive power and resists it. **Inevitably this results in some kind of suffering.**

- In the NT we not only have much teaching about discipleship and suffering, but right at its heart is the cross of Christ. It was in calamity and not serenity that the church was born. Suffering, in the sense of taking up one's cross, is now revealed as a central part of discipleship, and the NT again and again recognizes that we will suffer (cf. James and 1 Peter, for example) and that God is at work in our suffering.

## DISCUSSION

1. At the end of chapter 7, Solomon notes that wisdom is in short supply. He then asks rhetorically, "Who is like the wise?" Why do you think wisdom seems to be in such short supply, both then and now?
2. What has been your experience navigating the challenges of being under authority (of any kind)? Would the Teacher's advice apply to dealing with your boss? Discuss times in your life where you've been in a situation where you had to live under an authority that did not always make the right decisions.
  - ➔ Do you agree with what the Teacher's advises us to do in these situations? Is that how you tend to operate? How do you know when to speak up and stay quiet? What is the role of wisdom in these decisions?
3. After reading 8:10-14, discuss with the group how it makes you feel when you see dishonesty, immorality, and corruption rewarded with wealth and acclaim. In what ways can you relate to the Teacher's frustration over the contradiction between what he sees and what he knows to be true?
  - ➔ Though the Teacher has no answers for why these things happen, he confesses his belief that "even though sinners do evil a hundred times and prolong their lives, I know it will be well with those who fear God" (8:12). What is your reaction to his statement? What does it teach us about the importance of faith when we cannot explain or remedy the realities of evil and injustice in our world?
4. In your own words, how would you summarize the Teacher's strong recommendation in 8:15? Consider the context of this recommendation and the difficulties surrounding it. If we still observe the same agonizing things in our world, what does it look like to live out the Teacher's recommendation? How do we experience and know joy in the presence of God?
5. Reading 8:8 and 8:16-17 reminds us of a constant theme in Ecclesiastes (and Scripture as a whole): God is God and we are not. The Teacher says, "Look, there are problems that are unavoidable and inevitable. Even the smartest, wisest people cannot explain all of life. Trust God and leave the details to him."
  - ➔ How do we feel about the Teacher's observation that there are many things in life we will never be able to control or understand? Does it give us peace? Deepen our faith? Make us more frustrated? Something in between?
  - ➔ What can we do to lessen the ill effects we experience when we encounter things we cannot control or understand?
  - ➔ How has the Teacher's observations influenced the way you may respond to God in the future when life does not make sense?