

# The Value of Wisdom Under an Authority

📖 Ecclesiastes 8:1-9

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Turn to Ecclesiastes 8. This chapter comes in two parts. Eccl 8:1-9 discusses the value of gaining wisdom. Eccl 8:10-17 discusses some limitations of wisdom. Wisdom is valuable but it does have limitations. So it's a very beneficial thing, but it can't do everything. Just to review, what is wisdom in Hebrew thought? The word in the Hebrew is *chokmah*. It has several usages in various contexts. In some contexts it means "skill in technical matters," such as building the temple furniture or sewing the priestly garments, in others it means "shrewdness gained by experience," as in a course taken due to experience with the world, in others it means "worldly wisdom," which is a mere human type of wisdom that is really false wisdom, in others it means "godly wisdom," which is to live skillfully according to divine revelation, in others it means "God's wisdom," which is manifest in His skillful creation, and in others it is "wisdom personified," as in something calling out in the streets, beckoning people to come and gain wisdom. So it has several usages, but the usages in Ecclesiastes are "worldly wisdom," which is just human type of wisdom that is really a false wisdom, the wisdom of the world, and "godly wisdom," which is skill in living according to divine revelation, a skillful way of life. And it's "godly wisdom" that is the kind of wisdom in view in Eccl 8. What Solomon wants to do is develop further what wisdom can do. He already told us at the end of chapter 7 that divine wisdom can reveal that God made man upright and good, but man is a sinner and has sought out many explanations for why we enjoy prosperity or face adversity. Wisdom reveals that. But can it do anything else? Are there any other benefits to wisdom? The short answer is, yes, but we want to see what Solomon has to say.

In Eccl 8:1 he begins with a question, and as we go into this, you're going to see very quickly that the situation is that you have a king and one of his courtiers, an attendant in the royal court. And the king has absolute power and so the courtier has to use wisdom to attend well to the king, lest he get in the path of his wrath. Glenn in the Bible Knowledge Commentary said it this way, "The background for this section is the recognition of the absolute authority of the king (cf. Prov. 24:21–22) and the need for proper decorum to avert his wrath (cf. Prov. 14:35; 16:14; 20:2)."<sup>1</sup> By "proper decorum," the author means "proper behavior" in the court. You see, if you were to be a courtier in the royal court, you better be on your best behavior, you better think carefully about how you are going to respond to the king, because if you have the wrong response, off with your head. It's that simple. So

you need wisdom to guide you. And through this we'll learn the principles for how to respond to any authority figure, whether it be in the home, the workplace, the government or the military. Anywhere there is an authority structure, wisdom is needed by those who are under authority, to respond correctly.

So Solomon asks in 8:1, **Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter?** Now the way it's phrased in the NASB a comparison is being made with **the wise man**, and the preposition sometimes does take on a comparative sense, but it also commonly takes on an identity sense, and that's how it should be translated here. So we would translate, "Who is the wise man?" It's just introducing the wise courtier. And the next phrase, **who knows the interpretation of a matter**, could also use some work. The word **interpretation** is *pesher*, and it can be translated "interpretation," but it can also be translated "solution." And that's what's in view here, a wise man who knows the solution to **a matter**, or better, the solution to a problem. Well, who is he? Who is a wise man who knows the solution to a problem? Answer, **A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam.** What this is saying is that a wise courtier will have a certain demeanor about him in the royal court. These men were to be pleasant to the eyes. You don't want to walk into the king's court and see these courtiers with scowls on their faces. You want to see pleasant faces, faces that **beam**, which is not that commonly used today, but you get the point. The king's court should have a certain atmosphere that is pleasant and inviting and that means that no matter what is happening in the life of the courtier, he has to carry himself a certain way, and that way must be delightful. Now to get a picture of this, turn to the book of Nehemiah. In Neh 1:11, right at the end of the verse, we see that Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the King. This was King Artaxerxes, the great Persian king who was the step-son of Esther. In Neh 1:1 we see that Nehemiah was serving "in Susa the capitol." In verse 2 we see that "Hanani, one of" Nehemiah's "brothers, and some men from Judah came" and Nehemiah questioned them concerning the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from captivity. In verse 3 they reported that there was "great distress and reproach and the wall of Jerusalem was broken down and its gates were burned with fire." In verse 4 this caused Nehemiah great distress and sadness. So he wept and mourned and fasted and prayed to the God of heaven. His basic hope was that he might be granted permission by the king to play some role in the deliverance of Jerusalem. After four months of praying, 2:1 reports this, "And it came about in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart. Then I was very much afraid." You see, it was very dangerous to have a sad expression on your face in the king's court. The reason is the king could interpret your sadness as displeasure with his policies. And that would mean off with your head. Further, Gentile kings wanted their courts to be pleasant places where everyone enjoyed the atmosphere. So when the king noticed that Nehemiah had a sad face, and it was not due to sickness, we understand why Nehemiah became very afraid. The Hebrew means he was in terror; he feared he had offended the king and was about to lose his head. So here's an illustration of how important it was to have a delightful appearance in the king's royal court, no matter what the circumstances may have been in your life. Nehemiah was sad for four months and he had to

serve wine to the king daily in his court and put on a joyful face. It took him four months to work up the courage to go in before the king with a facial expression that was consistent with his inner thoughts. And that is what Eccl 8:1 is saying, a wise man will have a delightful appearance, because otherwise he will come under the wrath of the king. And I think we can all imagine, though we don't have a king, but a President, but what should our appearance be like if we were to go into the oval office before the President? We wouldn't want to go in there with a sad face or a face of displeasure. That might be displeasing to the President. So wisdom guides us in how to present ourselves before authority figures.

In 8:2-4 we see another description of wisdom's advantage in the service of an authority. **I say, "Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God."** When someone would enter into service of **the king** he would take an **oath before God** to be loyal to the king. We don't often think this way because the constitution is where our allegiance is directed, and the President and other governing authorities are subject to the constitution as well. But in the ancient world when you had a **king**, it was loyalty to **the king**. Rex Lex as they said it in the time of the Reformation, the king is the law. So the **oath before God** was an oath to obedience to **the command of the king**. Therefore, to disobey the **command of the king** was to break your **oath before God**. Disobedience to one was disobedience to the other. It was not wise to do this. That's why the wise course was to **keep the command of the king**. And the reason is **because of the oath of God**. This is the vein in which Romans 13 was written. Turn to Romans 13:1. Now this came in the context of being a good witness in society. Part of being a good witness is abiding by the authority of the governing authorities. Fundamentally we should not be lawbreakers, but law-keepers. This has always been a controversial passage, but the rule of thumb is to obey the governing authorities because God has established governing authorities. Verse 1, "Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities." Why? Reason one, "For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.<sup>2</sup>Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves." So reason one is the same reason we see in Eccl 8:2, God established governing authority, and therefore to rebel against it is to rebel against Him. Reason two, verse 3, "For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same;<sup>4</sup>for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil." Reason two is also in Eccl, but we haven't got there yet, it's verse 3, because of wrath. If you violate the governing authority, you will come under the wrath of the governing authority. So don't violate the governing authority. That's why verse 5 says, "Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection," that doesn't leave much room for rebellion, and then he adds reason three, "not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.<sup>6</sup>For because of this you also pay taxes, for *rulers* are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing.<sup>7</sup>Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor." Your conscience should tell you that you should be in subjection, and an example of this is paying taxes to whom taxes are due, paying honor to those

whom we should honor, etc...etc...The point is the same point Jesus made in the Gospels, and that is, "Render to Caesar that which belongs to Caesar, and to God that which belongs to God." The people then were the same as the people now, they didn't want to pay taxes or give honor to certain governing authorities, for whatever reason, but God and Jesus and Paul said, it is necessary. As we return to Ecclesiastes 8, this is the point of verse 2, wisdom dictates that if you are in the service of the king and have taken an oath to God to be loyal to the king, then keep the command of the king. Otherwise you are going to be in big trouble. And in the ancient world it meant off with your head. So wisdom says obey.

Further, verse 3, wisdom dictates **Do not be in a hurry to leave him.** That is, don't hastily resign from a position of service to the king. The king may get mad at you, or you may not like a policy, but wisdom displays itself in the ability to maintain your composure. Storming out of the king's presence would display folly and it would also be dangerous.

Furthermore, verse 3b, **Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases.** In other words, don't join in a plot of evil against the king. You may want to plot evil against the king, but the king will find out, and then **he will do whatever he pleases** to you, and that won't be pleasant. Turn to Esther 2:21. This is the portion of the story where providentially Mordecai, Esther's uncle, overheard a plot to destroy the king. Verse 21, "In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's officials from those who guarded the door, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus." So we have a plot against the king's life. "But" verse 22, "the plot became known to Mordecai and he told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name." Now that it came to the ears of the king, the king did as he pleased, verse 23, "Now when the plot was investigated and found *to be so*, they were both hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the Book of the Chronicles in the king's presence." So, as we return to Eccl 8:3, you would not want to be in the service of the king and plot evil against the king because it will become known to the king and then the king will chop your head off or you will suffer some terrible thing. So, it is not in the way of wisdom to plot evil against an authority.

That is what verse 4 is getting at, **Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, "What are you doing?"** The **word of the king** was the final word. There was no other authority to appeal to. So **who** is going to **say to him, "What are you doing?"** There is no one to say that. Although, I will say this; this is one of those places where it seems he is writing to Gentile nations, because in Israel there were the prophets, and the prophets did have the right to issue judgments against the king. The office of prophet was unique to the nation Israel. It put limitations on the king. Turn to 1 Kgs 21. This is the story of Naboth's vineyard. In verse 1, "Now it came about after these things that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard which *was* in Jezreel beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria." It was very convenient for Ahab, right next to the palace. So, verse 2, "Ahab spoke to Naboth, saying, "Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden because it is close beside my house, and I will give you a better vineyard than it in its place; if you like, I will give you the price of it in money."

This is the idea of eminent domain, which had no place in Israel. These properties were given to families by divine right, and they could not sell them by law. "But" verse 3, "Naboth said to Ahab, "The Lord forbid me that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." "So Ahab came into his house sullen and vexed because of the word which Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him; for he said, "I will not give you the inheritance of my fathers." And he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and ate no food." He was being a big baby is what he was doing. Verse 5, "But Jezebel his wife came to him and said to him, "How is it that your spirit is so sullen that you are not eating food?" "So he said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if it pleases you, I will give you a vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" "Jezebel his wife said to him, "Do you now reign over Israel?" See, are you not the king? Can't you do whatever you want. Now, remember, she was a Gentile. She's not accustomed to life in Israel. She only knows that in her country, the king is the law and whatever the king says, that's the end of it. So she's acting on that premise. And in vv 8-14 she connives an evil plot to have two false witnesses witness against Naboth and they witness against him and sentence him to death. In verse 15 "When Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth, the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead." That'll teach everybody who the authority is! Verse 16, "When Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab arose to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it." Now in any Gentile country that would be the end of it. Kings did whatever they wanted. But in Israel things were different. There was the prophet. Verse 17, "Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, "Arise, go down to meet Ahab king of Israel, who is in Samaria; behold, he is in the vineyard of Naboth where he has gone down to take possession of it. "You shall speak to him, saying, 'Thus says the Lord, "Have you murdered and also taken possession?"' And you shall speak to him, saying, 'Thus says the Lord, "In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth the dogs will lick up your blood, even yours.'" I just wanted to show that the passage in Ecclesiastes 8 seems like one of the evidences that Solomon wrote this book to be circulated among all the Gentile nations that he had business and commerce with in the ancient world. And that this is his last testimony to them, after he had repented, because Ecclesiastes 8:4 was not true in Israel. There was someone who could say to the king, "**What are you doing?**" and that someone was the prophet. God gave the prophetic office to keep the king in check. And it's very interesting that you don't find that feature in any of the Gentile nations. So in Gentile nations the wise thing to do was to obey the king and not hastily resign or plot evil against the king. That would not be tolerated.

Now in Eccl 8:5-7 we see that wisdom guides the servant of the king in knowing the proper time and procedure in the presence of the king. **He who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble.** No harm will come to him because he's obeying the command of the king. The next phrase, **for a wise heart knows** seems to give a reason, but it's translated incorrectly. It should simply say "and a wise person knows" **the proper time and procedure.** You see, there is a **proper time** to say something to the king and there is a proper **procedure** for doing so. You may be in the position of giving counsel to an authority figure. If you are and you have wisdom,

you know there is a **proper time** to do that and an improper time. And it will not go well for you if it is the improper time. There is also a proper **procedure** to follow or way to do it and an improper way. And if you do it improperly it's not going to go over well. I would say this, all these instructions being given should be followed in all authority structures; whether it is the home, the office, the military, the government, wherever there is a God-ordained authority structure, these instructions should be followed, and if you have wisdom it will guide you through the very often sticky wickets of authority.

Here we are looking at the proper time and the proper procedure for addressing a king's command. Verse 6 gives reason why, **For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight.** That word **delight** is confusing. The Hebrew word can mean "delight" or "joy," but it can also mean "matter" or "business," and that is what it means here. We would translate, **For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's trouble is heavy upon him,** that is, the matter weighs heavily upon him, but still he must be patient and wait for the **proper time and** make sure he is following the **proper procedure.** Turn to Daniel 1. Here is a very good example of someone in an authority structure who is given instruction and who has a problem with the instruction and is very careful to handle it in the **proper time and** with the **proper procedure.** This is Daniel. Daniel is a part of the wisdom corpus of literature in Israel. He's an example of a wise-guy. And he was only 15 or 16 when this took place. So it is not to be expected that wisdom comes late in life. It is expected that by 15-16 a young man has wisdom. This kind of expectancy that during these years they are going to sow their wild oats and have fun is just modern baloney. Look at the wisdom this young man exemplifies in a very touchy situation. Daniel, along with others from the sons of Israel, had been taken into captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar of the Babylonians. He had a program for these young men to be educated in the Babylonian doctrines, so as to serve in his court and aid in the assimilation of the Jews in Babylonian society. We see his program of education in verses 3-4. "Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his officials, to bring in some of the sons of Israel, including some of the royal family and of the nobles, youths in whom was no defect, who were good-looking, showing intelligence in every *branch of wisdom*, endowed with understanding and discerning knowledge, and who had ability for serving in the king's court; and *he ordered him* to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans." He wants to indoctrinate them. Now in verse 5 we see his provision for them, a very gracious provision. "The king appointed for them a daily ration from the king's choice food and from the wine which he drank, and *appointed* that they should be educated three years, at the end of which they were to enter the king's personal service." Now isn't that nice of the king. Free food, and not just any food, the best food, the king's choice food and libations. And free room and board and public education. What a deal! But the food and wine were a problem for Daniel because it violated the Mosaic dietary laws. So it's a very sticky situation Daniel and the other Jews found themselves in. How would wisdom help them get out of this sticky situation? Verse 8, "But Daniel made up his mind that he would not defile himself with the king's choice food or with the wine which he drank;" so here's what he did, "he sought *permission* from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself." He went to an authority figure and made a request. He didn't just disobey. Wise man. Verse 9, "Now

God granted Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the commander of the officials,<sup>10</sup> and the commander of the officials said to Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has appointed your food and your drink; for why should he see your faces looking more haggard than the youths who are your own age? Then you would make me forfeit my head to the king." Daniel is not the only wise man in the room. The commander of the officials is also wise. He knows that if he doesn't see to it that these youths eat the king's choice food and wine that it will be "off with his head!" So what procedure did Daniel follow? Verse 11, "But Daniel said to the overseer whom the commander of the officials had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah,<sup>12</sup> "Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink.<sup>13</sup> "Then let our appearance be observed in your presence and the appearance of the youths who are eating the king's choice food; and deal with your servants according to what you see." He proposed a test. And isn't this a tremendous example of Eccl 8:5-6, there is a **proper time and procedure** to follow when an issue weighs heavily on you? Yes. There is, and wisdom will guide you through it. Those who are hasty and fools don't take the time to find the way. They try to rush in and it's always fools that rush in and they make a mess of things and the whole thing is a disaster and it shouldn't have been handled that way. There is a **proper time and a proper way**, and wisdom is the guide as to when and how a matter ought to be handled. Daniel at 15-16 years of age is our instructor in this matter.

And Eccl 8:7 just reinforces the point, **If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen.** In other words, if no one knows the future, it is even more incumbent upon us to follow wisdom in deciding the **proper time** and proper **procedure**. Therefore, in handling a matter, don't rush it, just think about it, pray about it and at the proper time, exercise a wise procedure.

In Ecclesiastes 8:8-9 he describes by analogy why it's so important for a servant of a king to respond with wisdom to his authority. **No man has authority to restrain the wind with the wind, or authority over the day of death; and there is no discharge in the time of war, and evil will not deliver those who practice it.**

Essentially, just as a man can't control the wind or decide the day of his death or be discharged in the middle of war, so he can't escape the consequences of failing to be guided by wisdom. **Evil** in this verse is a description of acting contrary to wisdom. If you do evil, how do you expect to be delivered from the king's wrath, or from the government's authority. Acting contrary to them will result in punishment, so, apart from the option illustrated by Daniel, using the proper time and procedure to work around a matter, the best course is to follow the command. It's only when our consciences are pricked that we would be disobeying God by obeying the authority, that we should pray for wisdom to address it at the proper time and in the proper way. Wiersbe expressed it this way, and I think this is a good summary of everything here. "When it comes to matters of conscience and the law, devoted believers have pretty much agreed with Peter: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Christian prisoners and martyrs down through the ages testify to the courage of conscience and the importance of standing up for what is right. This doesn't mean we can resist the law on every minor matter that disturbs us, but it does mean we have the obligation to obey our conscience. How we express

our disagreement with the authorities demands wisdom and grace; this is where<sup>2</sup> we exercise discernment in deciding the proper time and procedure to address the situation.

In verse 9 Solomon says, **All this I have seen and applied my mind to every deed that has been done under the sun wherein a man has exercised authority over another man to his hurt.** In other words, Solomon observed and thought about how kings exercised their authority over those in service. His conclusion was that it is dangerous to disobey the authority of the king. Therefore, wisdom is a guide and something to be highly sought after.

In conclusion, verse 1 is saying that it is important to have a wise decorum in the presence of the king. The example from Nehemiah illustrates the danger of not. He, however, was able to use wisdom to discern the proper time and procedure to go in before the king with sadness and have his request granted. In verse 2, the rule of thumb is that wisdom will keep the command of the king because the servant took an oath before God to be loyal to the king. The teaching of Paul in Romans agrees because all authority is from God and so submission to governing authorities is necessary. In verse 3, if the authority does something the servant does not like, it is not wise to hastily resign. Nor is it wise to develop an evil plot against the authority. For once he finds out, he will exercise his authority in punishing you. The story of Mordecai and the two men Bigthan and Teresh who plotted evil against King Ahasuerus, illustrates how the king will find out and punish accordingly. So it is not in wisdom. In verse 4, because the word of the king is the authority, there is no one who can say, "What are you doing?" This was true in Gentile nations, showing evidence that this book may have been sent by Solomon to all the nations. But it was not absolutely true in Israel. In Israel there were the prophets and they could address the wrongdoings of the king and pronounce judgment upon them. The illustration from Ahab and Jezebel who murdered Naboth to take his vineyard, followed by the prophet Elijah's judgment upon both of them, serve as good reminders of the prophet's role in Israel. But in Gentile nations it was not so. In verse 5, the servant who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble, for he is doing what he took an oath before God to do. And a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure if he has trouble keeping a command. Verse 6, for there is a proper time and a proper procedure for every matter, though the matter may weigh heavy upon the man. Patience is required in exercising wisdom to determine when to address the matter and how to address it. Anyone under authority needs to gain wisdom in order to learn how to do this. Daniel is a wonderful example. He had the command of the king but took time to pray about it and at the proper time addressed the official and requested a procedure to get around disobeying God. Verse 7 reinforces the point, for if no one knows what will happen, and no one can tell him when it will happen, it is even more incumbent upon us to exercise wisdom in proper timing and procedure to address a matter. In verse 8, wisdom is very valuable because no man can escape the consequences of acting without wisdom. The king is going to punish you. So get wisdom. James says in 1:5, that "if a man lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a



double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." Therefore, the message is get wisdom, it is valuable and will help you know how to respond to any authority figure, whether it is in the home, in the workplace, in the military or in the government. Wisdom is an invaluable part of your armor and if you lack it, ask God, but ask in faith, for if you ask with doubt you will not receive it. In any case, I hope you see the value of wisdom, certainly an asset that is not widely acquired or possessed in modern Christian culture, and so something desperately needed.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 996.

<sup>2</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 98.