

The Limitations of Wisdom

📖 Ecclesiastes 8:10-17

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In Ecclesiastes 8 we are looking at wisdom. In this chapter wisdom is godly wisdom, or what we sometimes call divine view point wisdom. In Eccl 8:1-9 Solomon is teaching us to get this wisdom. The NT agrees, as James wrote, "If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all generously." Wisdom is valuable for navigating the difficulties of life. Solomon applies this principle to serving under an authority figure. The example he uses is a king and his courtier, but these principles apply to any authority structure God has given; whether it be in the home, where the husband is the authority over the wife and the husband and wife are the authority over the children, the workplace, where the employer is the authority over the employee, the church, where the elders are the authority over the congregation, the military, where the higher ranking officers are in the authority over the lower ranks, and so forth and so on. And, of course, if you are the authority, you are not to lord it over those whom you are in authority over. But Solomon is looking from the perspective of the one who is under the authority, and how important it is to have wisdom and exercise it, especially when under the authority of a king.

In 8:1, and here I had to do some re-translation work. Ecclesiastes, and the Hebrew text in general, requires a lot more translation work than the NT. The reasons are because it is more ancient than the NT Greek, and it is more difficult to know and understand the historical background and usage of the words in earlier times. So, I've re-translated 8:1 to read, "Who is the wise man and who knows the solution to a problem?" Well, he's the man the rest of the verse describes, who stands in the king's presence with the proper decorum, that is, with the proper facial expression and attitude. We illustrated from Nehemiah how dangerous it would be to stand in the king's presence without proper decorum. You might lose your head if you do that. In 8:2 there's more wisdom, "I say, keep the command of the king because of the oath before God." The rule of thumb is to keep the command of the king because you took an oath before God to be loyal to the king. Paul's teaching in Romans agrees, saying that all authority is from God and so submission to governing authorities is necessary. In 8:3, "Do not be in a hurry to leave him," means that if the king does something the servant disagrees with, the servant should not hastily resign. That would be unwise. Further, "Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases." In other words, if you don't like something the king has done, it is unwise to form an evil plot against him

because once he finds out, and he will, he will exercise his authority in punishing you. The illustration from Mordecai and the two men Bigthan and Teresh who plotted evil against King Ahasuerus, illustrates how the king found out the evil they planned and punished them accordingly. So it is not in wisdom to conspire against an authority. In 8:4, "Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, "What are you doing?" In other words, no one could challenge the king's authority. This was true in Gentile nations, but not in Israel. In Israel there were prophets who had the authority to challenge the wrongdoings of the king and pronounce judgment upon them. We illustrated from Ahab and Jezebel who had Naboth murdered in order to take his vineyard. This was judged by the prophet Elijah and they both died horrible deaths. But in Gentile nations there was no one to correct the king, giving evidence that this book may have been sent by Solomon to all the nations as his final testimony to the futility of human view point wisdom and the value of divine view point wisdom. In 8:5, "he who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure." This addresses how a servant should respond to an authority when he disagrees with the authority. There is a proper time and procedure. Wisdom provides an answer. 8:6 continues, "for there is a proper time and a proper procedure for every matter, though the matter may weigh heavy upon the man." In other words, it may be an issue which is very bothersome to the servant, but if he has wisdom he will exercise patience to determine the proper time and procedure for addressing the matter. Daniel is a wonderful example. He had the command of the king to take food and drink that would defile him, but he took time to pray about it and at the proper time addressed the official and requested a procedure that would allow him to not defile himself, and it worked. 8:7 reinforces the point, for "if no one knows what will happen, and no one can tell him when it will happen," it becomes even more incumbent upon us to exercise wisdom in proper timing and procedure to address a matter. In 8:8 then, wisdom is very valuable because no man can escape the consequences of acting without wisdom. The king will punish a foolish response. So the lesson is that if you are in a role of subordination, and we all are in some respect, then we need to get wisdom. The way to get wisdom is to ask God with faith, knowing that He gives generously to all who come to Him trusting that He will provide it. Wisdom, therefore, is very valuable.

Now, in 8:10-17 Solomon sets out to show that even though we should get wisdom, wisdom doesn't solve every problem, it can't penetrate into omniscience and explain all that God is up to. There are cases in life that we observe that don't make sense. The main observation Solomon reports is described in verse 14. It's a discrepancy we've seen before. There seems to be a discrepancy in the justice and goodness of God. As verse 14 says, "there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous." In other words, bad things happen to righteous people and good things happen to evil people. Job is a good example. Job was a righteous man and bad things happened to him. Why is that? Where is the justice of God? Solomon shows us in this section that wisdom can't provide an explanation for this. As he said earlier in chapter 7, this is hidden in the counsels of God which cannot be penetrated by wisdom or righteousness. So, we ought to just keep our mouths shut. Therefore,

while wisdom is valuable, it is not all-powerful. It cannot penetrate into the wisdom of God exhaustively. It is shut up to what He has revealed. The rest remains a secret.

The enigma is portrayed in verse 10, but again, the NASB is a poor translation and very confusing. We'll read it just to get confused. **So then, I have seen the wicked buried, those who used to go in and out from the holy place, and they are soon forgotten in the city where they did thus. This too is futility.** Some kind of injustice took place here, but it's impossible to see what it is with this translation. The words translated **So then**, could better be translated, "It was then that I saw..." In other words, in verse 9 it says he "applied" his "mind to every deed that has been done under the sun," and in verse 10, "It was then that" he "saw" what follows. The most difficult part is that which immediately follows, **I have seen the wicked buried**, which does not seem to be an injustice at all, but the very epitome of justice. And what this has to do with going in and out of the holy place is not clear. The **wicked** do wicked, so justice would say the wicked should die and be **buried**. But the Masoretic text is questioned here because of unintelligibility. The Masoretic text says **buried**, no doubt, but it doesn't make sense in the context. Several scholars suggest an emendation to the text and this is followed by a number of translations (NAB, NEB). The emendation would read, "I saw the wicked approaching and entering the" holy place (NET). The holy place is the temple. This emendation makes sense because the participle "approaching" is very similar to the participle "buried," and is commonly used for someone coming to the temple. What Solomon saw then, was wicked people approaching and entering the temple. Now we have to work with what is said next and another textual issue is involved. The MT reads, **and they are soon forgotten in the city where they did thus**. However, several Hebrew medieval manuscripts read "and they boasted," which is also reflected in the LXX. Therefore, the translation should probably read, "and as they left the temple, they boasted in the city that they had done so." In other words, the wicked boasted that they were able to approach and enter the temple without any divine retribution. Solomon saw a case of injustice and it bothered him. Wallace, editor of the NET Bible said, "The wicked boast that they can come and go as they please in the temple, flaunting their irreligion without fearing divine retribution (8:10)." ...¹ Solomon concludes the verse saying, **This too is futility**. Another thing that is "vanity" when viewed from the standpoint of under the sun. From the human standpoint it seems that God is not just.

Verse 11 continues the thought and discusses the repercussions. **Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil.** In other words, because God does not exact justice quickly, people are more prone to do evil, thinking they can get away with it too. Wallace said it this way, "...failure to execute a sentence against a criminal emboldens the wicked to commit more crimes, confident they will not suffer retribution." The postponement of justice was and is seen in the Christian worldview as fostering evil. It's quite true that due investigation must take place, but to delay justice for years is not a deterrent to evil, it fosters evil. Why then did God allow them to get away with it? Why did he not do anything about it? Solomon hoped that wisdom would penetrate this problem, but sadly, wisdom can't access the divine counsels.

In verse 12 Solomon continues, **Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly.** This picks up the earlier thought from 7:15 and 18. In 7:15 he said, "I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility; there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his wickedness." Solomon observed this strange incongruity. Why would a righteous person die young and a wicked person live a long life? Ultimately, these were exceptions to the norm, but still Solomon observed them. His answer to how to live then, was 7:18, to heed both warnings and fear God. On one hand, do not think that excessive righteousness and wisdom will gain you merit with God to earn a long life and blessing. On the other hand, do not think that you can live wickedly and get away with it. The bottom line is to fear God. In a similar vein, here in 8:12 he says there is **a sinner** who **does evil a hundred times and** it's possible that he **may lengthen his life.** This is a possibility, but it is not common, it is only an exception to the general rule of thumb, which Solomon cites next, **still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly.** Throughout Ecclesiastes wisdom is good and knowledge is good, but ultimately the way one is to live as in fear of the Lord. It will definitely go well for the one who fears God, the one who fears **Him openly.** To **fear God** is to live as if you are always in His presence, as if your life is on display before Him, which it is, so we should fear Him. It's sometimes said that the fear of God means awe or respect, and that's fine, but Paul draws out in 2 Corinthians what that looks like, and what it looks like is living as if you are on stage and God is your audience. So **a sinner** may seem to get away with **evil** repeatedly and still live a long life, which seems again like a breach of divine justice, but all that taken into consideration, it is much more certain **that it will be well for those who fear God.**

In 8:13 he says, **But it will not be well for the evil man and he will not lengthen his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God.** This seems to contradict the first part of verse 12 where he said "a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life." However, that is the exception to the general rule. Verse 13 is the general rule; generally, if one lives an evil life he will not **lengthen his days like a shadow.** The reason is **because he does not fear God,** that is, he does not live his life as if he is in God's presence. And the general rule of thumb when you do that is you will die young. You will be caught up in this or that and it will lead to distress or disease or disturbances that bring about a premature death.

But the whole picture was an enigma to Solomon. He presents that enigma in verse 14. **There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are vile men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility.** The verse begins and ends with **futility.** This is the Hebrew word *hevel*, which we usually translate as "vanity," but has other nuances. The root comes from the word which means "breath, vapor or wind." What do "breath, vapor and wind" all have in common? They can't be seen. They are invisible. In this sense they are "obscure or mysterious or enigmatic." That is the sense here and it should be translated enigmatic. Solomon is saying "There is another enigma that is done on the earth." The enigma is the injustice of **righteous men** getting what **the wicked** deserve and **wicked men** getting what **the righteous**

deserve. This, he says again, **is** “enigmatic,” something very difficult to understand. But we have all observed it and it has bothered us all and we may want to know why, as Solomon wanted to know why. Solomon thought that if he gained wisdom he might understand why. But, as we will see, while wisdom is valuable, it cannot penetrate into this problem of apparent injustice. There are reasons, we don’t want to say God has no reason and God is a God of caprice, but He has not revealed why in some cases the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer adversity, and it is enough for the eyes of faith to maintain that God works all things together for good, that He has a good purpose for it, and in the end we will likely see it; whether in this life or the next. Wiersbe made this suggestion, “How should the wise person respond to the inequities and injustices in this world? Certainly we should do all we can to encourage the passing of good laws and the enforcement of them by capable people, but even this will not completely solve the problem. Until Jesus Christ sets up His righteous kingdom, there will always be injustices in our world. It is one of the “vanities” of life, and we must accept it without becoming pessimistic or cynical.”²

In verse 15, what can we do or should we do? **So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a man under the sun except to eat and to drink and to be merry, and this will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life which God has given him under the sun.** By commending **pleasure**, Solomon is not commending a life of unconstrained pleasure, but simply enjoying life. This is the fourth time Solomon has made this suggestion on how to live life here **under the sun**. To **eat and to drink and to be merry** is a metaphor for enjoying the fruits of one’s labor. There is nothing wrong with enjoying the fruits of your labor. There is everything right with enjoying them. There is something wrong with not enjoying them. Money may be tight and sacrifices may have to be made, but having a little enjoyment of the fruits of your labor is important for your well-being in this fallen world. We do this giving thanks to God for the fruit, since ultimately it is Him who supplies all our needs. Wiersbe said, “For the fourth time, Solomon told his congregation to enjoy life and delight in the fruit of their labors (v. 15; see 2:24; 3:12–15; and 5:18–20). Remember, this admonition is not the foolish “eat, drink, and be merry” philosophy of the unbelieving hedonist. Rather, it is the positive “faith outlook” of God’s children who accept life as God’s special gift and know that He gives us “all things richly to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). Instead of complaining about what we don’t have, we give thanks for what we do have and enjoy it.”³ If we do this, Solomon says this enjoyment **will stand by him in his toils throughout the days of his life**. This means that it will give him energy and vitality to keep going. It is difficult to keep going through life when all your labor is toilsome. You work hard to pump out a product and there’s hardly anything that comes out of all that labor. Labor in a fallen world is toilsome, full of inequities, inefficiencies and inquiries. But if we enjoy some of the fruits of our labor then it will stand by us, meaning enliven us, give us motivation to keep going **throughout the days of our life**. These days which Solomon reminds us, **God has given us under the sun**. Each day is a gift of God and there is a purpose for each day.

In verse 16, what Solomon says is confused again by the translation. **When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night),**

and I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover. When I gave my heart to know wisdom was when Solomon set out on a human view point basis. It's when he was thinking according to the flesh. And as he did this he tried to sort out from the human view point **the task which has been done on the earth**, that is, what is going on in this world and why, he found this to be a grievous task. Where we see in the parentheses these words, **(even though one should never sleep day or night)**, the sense of the Hebrew is that trying to figure this all out will steal sleep from you. It's just such a great task and so overwhelming, that you can't sleep. So we might translate as the NET, "even though it prevents anyone from sleeping day or night."

Verse 17 is what he found, **and I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun**. Just trying to hold all the **work of God** together in your mind at one time is a heavy task. Our minds are too finite, too limited, and here we see the limitations of human wisdom in trying to figure out all that God has done. We can never do it. His conclusion is **that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun**. It's just too complicated. There are too many things going on. It is awesome to simply consider everything that is happening at any given moment across the globe and the cosmos. And to think that one can discover all that God is achieving, the purposes, the means, the end, is far too great for any human.

Even though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover it. The word **man** is *adam*, and refers to "mankind" or the human race. Even though the entire human race **should seek** for it with great **labor, he will not discover** what God has done from beginning to end. So not even a corporate search would yield discovery. It is too great for us. We are too limited. The answers are not going to come. Many people think we are progressing and one day we will have it all figured out. This is a blind dream. The accomplishments of the human race are trivial in comparison to what God has done, is doing and shall do.

The final phrase is a bit confusing, **and though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover**. This is a conditional clause in the Hebrew and should read, "if the wise man claimed to say, "I know," he would not really know. People can fool themselves into thinking they know. This has happened many times across the sands of time. Philosophers have thought they had the final answer, but someone else came along with a different answer and said, I have the answer. This has happened over and over and over and the only one who has the answer is God. What is the work which God has done from beginning to end? Read the word of God and there you will see at least the broad outlines of what He has done. But in all the details, no one can know. Paul, in Rom 11, after giving a broad outline of the plan of God, said, "Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" What God is doing is completely beyond all of us. And no matter how many books we read, no matter how many experiences we have, no matter how many facts we accumulate, no matter how many web searches we do, we will never figure

out all that God has done from beginning to end. It's just not possible. Wiersbe concluded, "Instead of rejecting wisdom, the king concluded that wisdom is important to the person who wants to get the most out of life. While wisdom can't explain every mystery or solve every problem, it can help us exercise discernment in our decisions."⁴

I think we have to come to grips with not having an answer for everything that happens. There is an obsession with trying to know or acting like you do know. It could be some political issue, like why God let Obama or Trump in office. It could be a personal issue, like why your mean sister is rich and you are poor. It could be a geography issue, like why you were born where you were born. But nobody has the answers to these questions. People think they know and speculate. But nobody really knows the answer. These things are all hidden in God. And you can make yourself an insomniac trying to figure them out, but you never will. It won't benefit you.

¹ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005).

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 101.

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 102.

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 102–103.