



ECCLESIASTES 8:1-15

1 Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed. 2 I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him. 3 Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. 4 For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, "What are you doing?" 5 Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way. 6 For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. 7 For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? 8 No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. 9 All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt. 10 Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. 11 Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. 12 Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. 13 But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God. 14 There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity. 15 And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

STRUCTURE

- I. **Intro: Wisdom that discerns God's patterns is exceptional and transformative (1)**
- II. **Wisdom navigates unavoidable realities: God's seasons, the king's decrees (2-8)**
 - a. Wisdom submits to the king to avoid self-destruction (2-5a)
 - b. Wisdom reads the moment despite not knowing the future (5b-7)
 - c. Wisdom accepts the limits it can't escape—death, war, judgment (8)
- III. **When humans abuse and neglect power, evil and vanity multiply (9–11)**
 - a. *Abuse:* Power is often abused "to hurt" (9)
 - b. *Neglect:* Delayed enforcement increases vanity and emboldens evil (10-11)
- IV. **Only those who fear God prosper—if not under the sun—then beyond it (12-14)**
 - a. The God-fearer ultimately fares well—even if not now (12)
 - b. The wicked will not escape judgment beyond the sun (13)
 - c. Under the sun, injustice persists and confounds (14)
- V. **Conclusion: Those who fear God endure vanity by choosing joy (15)**

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

Solomon has just finished exposing wisdom's limits—its inability to untangle every crooked thing under the sun. Yet instead of slipping into cynicism, he opens this section by lifting wisdom to almost doxological heights: "Who is like the wise?" True wisdom discerns God's patterns in a world of riddles, softening hard faces and transforming foolish hearts. Solomon starts here because the next movement of the chapter requires precisely this kind of wisdom.

This wisdom becomes essential as Solomon turns to authority—God's appointed seasons and the king's unavoidable decrees. Wisdom submits, not blindly, but prudently, knowing how quickly rebellion backfires. It sees the danger of storming out, joining reactionary causes, or resisting powers you cannot escape. Wisdom discerns the times and seasons God has appointed, but it simultaneously accepts its limitations: we can't predict the future, control or death, or escape the burdens placed on us by governing authorities.

Wisdom is also not naïve. After urging careful submission, Solomon immediately acknowledges the darker side of authority: people wield power to hurt each other. Leaders abuse it; rulers neglect it; and when judgment is delayed, wickedness grows bold. This is the world the wise must inhabit—and interpret—without losing their integrity.

Yet even in such a world, one thing remains certain: “It will be well with those who fear God.” The wicked may stretch out their days for a moment, but their shadow is short. Solomon’s apparent contradiction between prolonged life (v.12) and shortened days (v.13) pulls our eyes beyond the sun. Under the sun, injustice thrives; beyond the sun, God rights every wrong. The wise endure the tension because they fear the God who, in the end, makes crooked paths straight.

In the meantime, we must live with the burdensome vanity of prevailing wickedness. How do we endure life “under the sun” while we wait for God’s judgment beyond it? Solomon’s answer: joy. The joy he recommends is not fleeting and sentimental; it is theological. The one who fears God has learned not only to receive the seasons God ordains and rulers He has appointed, but also the life and blessings He has given. Fools seek control, but the wise posture themselves as receptive children before a generous Father. Joy does not erase the vexation; it is God’s gift within it. Those who center their lives on friendship with God find a joy that lightens every shadow under the sun.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.

—Having recently commended wisdom for the strength and protection it provides (7:19-22, 26)—while still acknowledging its limits (7:23-24, 28)—Solomon now commends wisdom again: it provides “the interpretation of a thing”, causing the face to “shine” with soft pliability to the divine hand.

—The double question functions like a doxological challenge—“Who is like the LORD?”—where the answer is self-evident. “Who is like the wise?” implies their near-unmatched rarity; “who knows the interpretation?” provides the reason: they perceive God’s patterns in a world everyone else finds opaque.

—Together they reveal how wisdom’s limitation should not produce cynicism. Sure, wisdom is limited—but its value is limitless.

—The OT provides examples of people who embodied the uniqueness and rarity of wisdom:

- *Joseph*: Pharaoh openly acknowledged Joseph’s unmatched discernment—“Can we find a man like this?”—and elevated him because “there is none so discerning and wise as you” (Gen. 41:38–39).
- *Deborah*: Israel sought her counsel because her God-given insight made her the nation’s trusted judge and prophetess (Judg. 4:4–5).
- *Solomon*: His God-given brilliance was so renowned that “all Israel” feared his judgment and rulers from every nation traveled to hear his wisdom (1 Kgs. 3:28; 1 Kgs. 4:29–34).
- *Huldah*: Josiah’s officials sought her out because her authoritative grasp of God’s word surpassed all others in Jerusalem (2 Kgs. 22:14–20).
- *Daniel*: Pagan kings prized him above every wise man, repeatedly elevating him because of the “excellent spirit” and unrivaled insight that set him apart (Dan. 1:19–20; 5:11–12; 6:3).

—Each of the above individuals displayed an ability to interpret divine revelation and earthly realities with a brilliance that drew crowds. “Who is like _____” was a common refrain.

—“makes his face shine”: Such wisdom surpasses mere cognitive abilities, which even fools can possess. The wise shine with heaven’s light. It emanates from their heart and transforms their countenance. Their face is “changed.”

—“hardness of face”:

- Pr. 21:29: “A wicked man puts on a **bold face**, but the upright gives thought to his ways.”
- Jer. 5:3: “They made their **faces harder than rock**; they refused to repent.”
- Dan. 8:23: The ruthless and defiant king puts on a “**bold face**”.
- We’ve all encountered someone with a “hard face.” You plead with them to consider sound arguments, or to empathize, or to change their ways. They stare back at you, but really through you, with intimidation in their eyes and tightness of jaw. They don’t care about you. They don’t care about logic and reason. Their face says, “I will not be challenged. After I endure your blabbering, I will do whatever I want.”

—Wherever those traits once marked him, wisdom has broken the granite. Divine light has softened him. Even hard-faced fools aren’t beyond transformation.

2 I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him. 3 Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases. 4 For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, "What are you doing?" 5 Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way.

—Verses 2-9 provide the practical expression of wisdom in a particular setting: government.

—“Keep the king's command”:

- Fearing God produces wisdom that honors the king. Obedience to governmental authorities will keep your face glowing with wisdom.
- Numerous NT passages reinforce this:
 - Romans 13:1: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”
 - Romans 13:2: “Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”
 - Romans 13:5: “Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.”
 - 1 Peter 2:13-14: “Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.”
 - 1 Peter 2:17: “Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.”
 - Titus 3:1: “Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work.”

—“because of God's oath to him”:

- The ESV footnote reads, “Or, ‘because of your oath to him.’”
- NKJV: “for the sake of your oath to God”; NIV: “because you took an oath before God”; NLT: “since you vowed to God that you would”; NASB: “because of the oath before God”; CSB: “because of your oath made before God.”
- Therefore, our options are: (1) “because of your oath to the king”, (2) “because of your oath to God”, and (3) “because of God's oath to the king”.
- If (3) is the meaning, this would be why: The following verses emphasize not personal integrity in oath-keeping but rather prudence that acknowledges the king's supreme position. Implicitly, in this case, the king's position is by God's sovereign arrangement (God's “oath”), and wisdom thus submits to secure one's well-being.
- Nevertheless, (3) is a minority reading. Overwhelming scholarly consensus supports (1) and (2), as most translations depict. In my view, historical and cultural analysis would probably support (1) and/or (2). In the Ancient Near East, subjects frequently swore allegiance to the king, often in God's presence.
- In this case, Solomon is offering two complimentary motivations for obedience to the king: (1) Personal integrity—you swore an oath, and (2) practical prudence—it avoids punishment.

—“Be not hasty to go from his presence”: In the least, this refers to disrespect—cutting off a conversation before the supreme ruler is ready for it. But in light of what follows, it probably extends beyond disrespect to storming out in a way that signals withdrawal of allegiance—an impulsive act that could be interpreted as rebellion.

—“Do not take your stand in an evil cause”: Solomon isn't asking for blind loyalty; he's warning against treasonous departures—because the king “does whatever he pleases”—which includes crushing rebels. If the king decides on such action, none can challenge him: “Who may say to him, ‘What are you doing?’”

—“Whoever keeps a command knows no evil thing”: Again, Solomon is not requiring blind loyalty. Contextually, he's warning against treason.

—“and the wise in heart will know the proper time and the just way”:

- This verse connects proper allegiance to the king with the wisdom extolled in v. 1.
- “will know” reminds us of the wise person's “interpretation of a thing”. When rebellious sentiments arise, wise people will discern the difference between holy dissent and unholy rebellion. The difference isn't always clear to all; the American Revolution was a case-in-point. We had loyalists and revolutionaries. Another example was the Jewish revolt in AD 67-70, which Titus crushed. The rebels

thought God was on their side, but both Daniel and Jesus prophesied otherwise. Those who sided against Rome realized far too late (post-mortem!) that God was not on their side. They lacked the wisdom that reads the times with clarity.

- In our cultural moment, the rage simmering on both ends of the political spectrum could easily erupt into something far more destructive. The wise won't get swept up in reactionary fervor; they'll discern what God blesses and what He opposes, long before the crowd chooses its cause. May God give us that kind of clarity.
- Even outside governmental settings, the same principle applies—especially when issues of justice arise. Love chooses a side, but wisdom discerns the right side. Fools leap into the first cause that stirs their emotions; wise people read the moment before acting. And far too often, people wreck reputations, fracture churches, and torch relationships because they chase “justice” without wisdom.
- This verse reminds us of the “times and seasons” God ordains in Ecclesiastes 3. Wise people discern the times and seasons rather than reacting to them.

6 For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. 7 For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be? 8 No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death. There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. 9 All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt.

—“For there is a time and a way for everything”: As we have observed, Solomon again recalls Ecclesiastes 3 about times and seasons. See final comment on verse 5.

—“although man's trouble lies heavy on him”: Verse 7 explains why “man's trouble lies heavy on him”—because “he does not know” the future. The ignorance is not trivial; it is suffocating. And verses 8 intensifies the point: you can't control your spirit, your death, your circumstances, or the consequences of rebellion. In that kind of world, wisdom isn't a luxury. It's a survival skill. It's not a crystal ball, but it gives discernment—just enough light to avoid joining fools and rebels in a cause you mistook for righteous.

—“no discharge from war”: This continues the theme of rebellion against the king. If he drafts you to fight, you have no choice, no control. As Ecclesiastes 3 reminded us, “There is a time for war”—you can't fight the king's summon to fight. This is just another form of rebellion that ultimately crushes you.

—“nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it”: Wicked people imagine they can circumvent the king's sovereign decrees through treachery, but they will be found out.

—These verses show how you can't escape EITHER God's times/seasons OR the king's supreme orders. Trying to evade the law is functionally the same as warring against God's times and seasons. If you storm out (v.3), align with rebels (v.3), attempt treachery (v.8), or imagine wickedness will deliver you (v.8)—you're not just defying the king; you're defying the limits God Himself has placed on human life. You're trying to bend the season to your will. It never works.

—In modern contexts, people dismiss these passages. After all, “we're a democracy!” While it's true that our government has been established on different terms than ancient monarchies, civil authorities still rule, and wisdom submits to them as unto the LORD, as we saw from earlier quotes of Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. Paul and Peter both exhorted submission to the very authorities who sought—and achieved—their execution. I praise God for our constitutional republic, but voting rights do not erase the biblical call to submission.

—In Solomon's logic, the king's authority is never ultimate, but it is real—and it operates within the orbit of God's sovereignty. The king's decrees form part of the “times and seasons” God appoints, which is why resisting the king's word often amounts to resisting God's ordering of reality. Ecclesiastes 8 flows on this alignment: God rules the seasons; the king rules his God-given circumstances; the wise read both and refuse to fight either.

—“But what about when kings and presidents become tyrants?!” Solomon is not ignorant of this possibility. The next verse addresses it.

—“when man had power over man to his hurt”:

- A rule of mankind is that people abuse power. In the context of political submission, Solomon acknowledges this painful reality. But this doesn't erase what he already said. Outside situations where political leaders require you to disobey the Almighty, submission to the government is submission to God.
- The wise don't excuse oppression, but they refuse to confuse suffering under authority with license to rebel against it.

10 Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. 11 Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil.

—“I saw the wicked buried”:

- They received an honorable burial, having veiled their wickedness through acts of piety—going “in and out of the holy place”.
- Both in life and death, their ruse succeeded. Not only did they receive a proper “burial”; they also “were praised in the city”—the very place where they “had done such [wicked] things”.
- On the heels of verse 9 about power that’s abused, “the wicked” must include tyrannical politicians. But it’s also not limited to them. Verse 11 expands the focus to all “the children of man” who give themselves to evil.

—“This also is vanity”: Like a mysterious, perplexing, and frustrating vapor, so is the praise and honor received by religious hypocrites. It grates the soul of the righteous.

—“Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily”:

- This keeps the theme of government in view. Kings are responsible for maintaining order. When they allow wickedness to prevail—wickedness prevails.
- The failure of governments to enforce righteous laws ensures not only that religious hypocrites will escape justice but also that other citizens will feel emboldened. Men set their hearts “to do evil” when they know they’ll get away with it.
- Wicked hearts don’t just slip into evil; they are “fully set”—committed—to it. God gives government as a gift to mankind for promoting justice and flourishing.
- In the Books of Daniel and Revelation, the prophets emphasize political corruption, portraying tyrannical government as a devouring beast. God designed government for good, but too often is either abuses power (v. 9) or neglects it (v. 11).

12 Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. 13 But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God. 14 There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity.

—Verses 12 and 13 are central to the section and also the whole book. The phrase “fear God” appears three times in just two verses.

—Despite the abuse and neglect of governmental power, and despite the wickedness it enables—and even rewards—the scales still tip in favor of those who fear God.

—There seems to be a contradiction: in verse 12 the wicked “prolong” their life, yet in verse 13 they “will not prolong their days”. For a book so focused on life “under the sun,” this tension points beyond the sun—to a future after death. Injustice may thrive in the present, but when death comes, God’s justice resolves what earthly governments failed to judge.

—Under the sun, the righteous might suffer while the wicked prosper. But beyond the sun, it will not be so. It will “be well with those who fear God”; it will “not be well with the wicked”.

15 And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

—Given the perplexing, mysterious, painful “vanity” of injustice, how can the righteous respond—besides fearing God? The answer: joy.

—How do we find joy in the midst of all this crushing vanity? By eating, drinking, and being merry. When Solomon says, “I commend joy” and “be joyful,” he’s not talking about fleeting feelings that rise and fall with circumstances. Joy is a choice—a settled posture taken right in the middle of “vanity” and “toil,” neither of which disappear as long as we breathe. And it is the practical reflex of those who “fear before God.” The God-fearer comes before Him like a receptive child, receiving life as a gift rather than something to control. Joy is theological: those who fear God orient their entire lives around Him, and receiving their life from His hand, they also enjoy His good gifts as small mercies that ease the sting of vanity.

—Joy is a theological act, not an accidental feeling.