



Ecclesiastes

(16) Wisdom Is Not Provoking the King

Ecclesiastes 8:1-9

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The verses that we are going to look at today are more like normal straightforward wisdom, although towards the end he deals with the limits of wisdom, but the whole thing is not as dark as some of the sections that we have covered recently. Basically, what we have in these verses is how to behave yourself in the presence of a king.

This suggests that one of the purposes of, at least, some of the wisdom literature of Israel was to instruct future leaders in Israel, how to conduct themselves in the presence of the king. Instruction that would be relevant to government officials is found in the book of Proverbs as well.

Now none of us is likely ever to be in the presence of an earthly king or a queen. Of course, we do find ourselves in the presence of our heavenly king every time that we gather for worship and every time that we pray, but that is not what these verses are about. None of us is ever likely to find ourselves in a situation which is exactly like that described in these verses, but that does not mean that the instruction of these verses is of no value to us. We do find ourselves in situations that are analogous to the situation described in these verses and so there is instruction here that will be useful to us.

First, we have a verse that recommends wisdom. Verse 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.” He is speaking positively about wisdom here. That is interesting in light of the fact that he has just gone to great lengths to show the short-

comings of wisdom. One of the main themes in chapter 7 is that often what happens in life contradicts traditional wisdom – wisdom such as such as, obey God and it will go well with you. One of the things that he has been struggling with is the fact that, at least from a this-worldly perspective, things do not always work out that way. Bad things happen to good people.

But that does not mean that wisdom is useless, and this section reflects that insight. Even though there are times when we are disgruntled with way that sometimes life just seems absurd and there seems to be no rhyme or reason for why things happen the way they do, we still have to live in the world, the way it is, and, generally speaking, it is better to be wise than it is to be a fool. Even though, sometimes, wisdom does not make much difference, generally it does. And one of the ways that we are called to live to the glory of God is to live lives of wisdom rather than living lives of foolishness.

In the second part of verse 1, we read, “A man’s wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.” Our faces are amazing creations of God that often reflect what we are feeling inside. That is an absolute miracle when you think of it. I watched a TV program lately, where a young girl was in the hospital for surgery because she had been born without the ability to smile. There was a problem with the nerves that controlled the smile and this otherwise healthy girl could not smile. And in the story, she speaks of the tremendous hindrance that this inability to smile was in her interactions with people. Now this was just a story, but it rang true. Our facial expressions play a huge roll in our interactions with one another. It is this part of our human experience that the author of Ecclesiastes is reflecting on here. “A man’s wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.”

He is saying that often the difference between a hard face and a shining face is wisdom. The person with a hard face is not a happy camper. Things are not going well for him. But wisdom can often transform a situation that is not going well into a situation that is going well and when that happens the hard face turns to a shining face. Wisdom has that power. It can change your face from a hard face to a shining face. So, while wisdom does not answer every question and while wisdom

does not penetrate all the enigmas and frustrations of life, it still has its place. The wise person spends more time with a shining face than he does with a hard face and that is worth something as we live our lives under the sun.

The wisdom that he is going to talk about here is how to act in the presence of a king. And his overall point is that things will go much better for you if you do what the king says and stay on his good side. Now he is not talking about a monarch like our very own Queen Elizabeth. She is just a figurehead and she does not have much power. Although she does not look like the kind of person that you would want to displease. The kind of king that Ecclesiastes is talking about was an absolute monarch. He had absolute authority. He was the kind of king who could just say, "Off with his head," and it would not be long before your head would be off. These ancient kings had the power of life and death and so wisdom had considerable value when it came to interacting with such kings. You don't want to displease someone who has that kind of power.

So, Ecclesiastes says, "Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him. Now the part about God's oath can be translated in a number of different ways. The alternate translation that the ESV gives is, "because of your oath to God." Regardless of exactly how it is meant to be read, we have God and an oath backing up the advice to keep the king's command. Whether God made the oath to the king or you made an oath to God concerning the king, either possibility is a strong incentive to obey the king.

But the rest of the advice is based on the fact that this king has unquestionable authority and so if you want things to go well with you, you had better act wisely around him. Verse 3 says, "Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases." The scenario here appears to be one of advisors discussing some thorny matter with the king. In such a situation, don't get too emotionally invested in your opinion. Don't stomp out of the room if the conversation is not going your way. Parents don't like it when you do that, but they have far less power than this king has. So, "be not hasty to go from his presence." In other words, "Keep your cool.

If the king is not taking your advice, listen respectfully to the rest of the discussion and leave calmly with the rest when it is time to live. If you stomp out, it might be the last thing you every do or if you do not lose your head, your rise up the corporate ladder of advisors might hit a roadblock.

Likewise, "Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases." The evil cause here is not something that is morally evil, but a bad idea or an idea that the king does not like. Don't take your stand if your idea is not going over well. Don't dig in your heels. The king is going to do what he wants to do anyway. If he thinks your idea is a bad idea, don't take a stand. Just say, "Yes, your highness. I see your point. You are very wise." When you are dealing with one of those temperamental absolute monarchs, it is wise to be very agreeable. "Yes, your highness. Whatever you say sir. Forget what I just said. It was a bad idea."

This is wisdom when you are in the presence of one of these fickle absolute monarchs.

Now if he were a wise king, he would welcome an advisor challenging his ideas, but people with absolute power do not tend to be wise. Absolute power does things to people's heads. No doubt you've heard it said, that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Absolute power is not conducive to wisdom and people who have it do not like to be challenged. So, if you are in the presence of such a person, tread carefully. You will have more chance of things going well for you.

Verses 4 & 5 are to be understood in this light. "4For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, "What are you doing?"
5Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way." When the word of the king is supreme, do what he says; do not ruffle his feathers and you will know no evil thing, such as getting thrown into a dungeon or like losing your head.

The last part of verse 5 tells us something very important about wisdom. "[T]he wise heart will know the proper time and the just way." Timing is very important when it comes to wisdom. We know that from

our own experience which is where wisdom comes from. Let's say that a husband wants to offer some critique to his wife for her benefit and perhaps everyone else's benefit as well. Timing is very important. There is a right time to serve your wife through loving criticism and there are many wrong times to do so. You have to be very wise about your timing if you are going to do something like that. That is the point that the author of Ecclesiastes is making here. In your interactions with a king with absolute authority, you have to be sensitive about the timing of things. You have to know when to speak and when to refrain from speaking. "[T]he wise heart will know the proper time."

There are a very interesting pair of Proverbs that illustrate the importance of timing when it comes to wisdom. Proverbs 26:4-5, ⁴"Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself." ⁵"Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes." These proverbs give opposite advice. One says, "Answer not a fool according to his folly" and the other says, "Answer a fool according to his folly." It's reasonable to ask, "So which is it?" Should we answer a fool according to his folly or should we not answer a fool according to his folly? The answer of wisdom is, "It depends on the situation." There is a time when it is wise to answer a fool according to his folly and there is a time when it is foolish to answer a fool according to his folly. If you want to be wise you must know whether it is time for the one or the other.

Wisdom is very interesting that way. It is about acting the best way at the right time. Of course, there are many areas where the timing is irrelevant. There is no right time to commit adultery, for instance. Timing is irrelevant when it comes to telling a lie. When it comes to what God requires of us in the Scriptures, wisdom is to obey no matter what time it is. But there are also situations in life in which the choice is not between right and wrong, but between wisdom and foolishness. And one of the key parts of wisdom is timing.

So, when it comes to your interactions with a king, "[T]he wise heart will know the proper time and the just way." The just way is also not always clear. Sometimes it is black and white, but often it is not that easy to

know. Wisdom is necessary in such situations as well. Wisdom is needed in situations where the best way forward is not obvious.

Now what has any of this have to do with your life? None of us is likely to end up needing wisdom to help us deal with an absolute monarch. That is true, but we will all have to deal with people who have a lot of authority over us in a specific situation and who have the power to really spoil our day or even negatively affect our lives.

Think of border-crossing guards. When you are crossing the border, they have a lot of power over your life. It pays to treat them like they are absolute monarchs. You need to use wisdom to get through the border without delay. You need to do what they say. You need to keep them happy. Being foolish when you are speaking to a border guard can really ruin your day. The same is the case with the police. In most cases you want to cooperate with them. Of course, God requires us to obey and respect authorities, but this passage tells us that we must use wisdom when speaking with people who have way more authority than we do. This passage is telling us that when we are relating to people who have a lot of power over us, the wise thing to do is to keep them happy. It matters what you say and how you say it and when you say it. A proverb like “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” is doubly important when you are dealing with someone who has the power to really spoil your day if you rub them the wrong way.

The same is the case with bosses. Bosses are not absolute monarchs, but bosses can have a lot of influence on your future. Bosses have a lot of power over the people who are under them. It pays to use the kind of wisdom for them that Ecclesiastes is recommending for ancient people in the presence of a king. Bosses can be temperamental. They can have bad days. They can be sensitive or petty. The more authority they have the less wise they are likely to be. They can sometimes use their power in ridiculous ways. Thinking about this passage can help your career. It matters how you say things. Some things are better left unsaid. It matters when you say things.

You see that biblical wisdom is about some pretty this-worldly matters. Living wisely means skillfully navigating everyday life. God cares about such things. It glorifies him when his people live wisely, and it does not

glorify him when his people act like fools. That is why we have this down-to-earth kind of instruction in the Bible.

The next three verses still apply to how to act in the presence of a king, but they are a little more general and they also come back to Ecclesiastes' struggle with the things he is unhappy about in God's world. "Verse 6, "For there is a time and a way for everything, although a man's trouble lies heavy on him." So, he is talking about wisdom. "There is a time and a way for everything." That, as we have seen, is a key wisdom motif. How we say and do things and when we say and do things, matters. Wisdom depends a lot on knowing when to act and knowing how to act in specific situations. What is wise in one situation may be foolishness in another situation. The Bible does not teach situation ethics, which teaches that what is right or wrong depends on the situation. Right is right and wrong is wrong. God's law does not change. But the Bible definitely teaches situational wisdom. What is wise in one situation can be foolish in another situation. Wisdom very much depends on the situation.

But the sad thing is that wisdom does not guarantee to make your face shine. Some days wisdom does not keep you out of trouble. That is what our wisdom teacher is reminding us in verse 6. "For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him." It is better to be wise than it is to be a fool, but even wise people have trouble in their lives. Wisdom makes life better, but wisdom does not make life trouble-free. Wisdom helps you avoid some troubles, but it does not help you avoid all troubles. You can be as wise as can be around one of those fickle absolute monarchs and he may not appreciate your wisdom and throw you in a dungeon anyway. There are no guarantees when it comes to wisdom. But still it is better to be wise than it is to be a fool.

Verse 7, "For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?" We looked at this idea last week. Wisdom is a lot about anticipating the best way forward in a situation. And so, it is about having a better future. Being wise makes it more likely that the rest of your day or the rest of your life will be good. But wisdom is limited. Wisdom does not always anticipate correctly. God keeps the future

pretty much hidden from us. And so, there are always surprises and things that we did not count on. He is saying that wisdom is limited because the future is hidden from us. If we knew how this or that would work out, it would be easier to choose the wise course of action.

Verse 8, “No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the death of death.” This too we have heard before. No matter how wise we are, we still die, and death means that wisdom will only help us temporarily. Remember that he does not have a clear view of eternity. And so, death means the end of everything. If that is the case, then wisdom only helps you temporarily. It does not save you from death.

“There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it.” You cannot walk away from a war. Once you are involved you have to see it through. You have no control over that. And the way of wickedness is no solution either. If righteousness does not guarantee that all will go well with you, wickedness surely is no answer to the problem of the hard and frustrating things about life.

And then the conclusion of this section. “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.” So, this is the main theme of the section. How to act wisely in the presence of someone who has power over you to your hurt. The bottom line is that wisdom is better than foolishness, but wisdom is of limited value because things do not always work out as you hope they will and anyway in the end we all die.

So, we have learned some things about wisdom and we have been reminded of some of the limitations of wisdom. It is better to be a wise than it is to be a fool, but wisdom is no guarantee that things will go smoothly for you. This is a realistic perspective, but it is not the full biblical perspective on life and on wisdom. Ecclesiastes himself comes to a more hopeful perspective by the end of the book, but the Bible as a whole brings us to a much happier place even taking into account the fact that this life can be difficult, and that it can be frustrating, and that we can sometimes feel some of the negativity about life that Ecclesiastes reflects.

The great thing that Ecclesiastes is showing us that if you only look at life from the perspective of under the sun, life can be very dark and hopeless. There is a lot of pain. There is a lot of suffering. There is a lot of frustration. And there is always death on the horizon, our own death and the death of our loved ones. If that is all there is, life can have its short-term pleasures, but there is a lot of suffering and then there is death.

This highlights the need of the eternal perspective that the Bible, as a whole, brings. How we feel about life has a lot to do with how we understand what is above the sun; what is above and beyond this whole earthly existence. The Bible reveals to us that God exists both in our earthly existence, but also above and beyond our earthly existence. In Psalm 90 Moses spoke of God who has “been our dwelling place in all generations...” a God who is God “from everlasting to everlasting.” God is an eternal God.

This is what the author of Ecclesiastes was not seeing clearly enough in his disillusionment with life. God is from everlasting to everlasting. What that means is that there is more to life than life under the sun. There is more to life than this earthly life. This God who is from everlasting to everlasting was always pointing to the future. And the OT saints understood to some extent that an eternal God meant an eternal future for his people although they did not understand as clearly as we do because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Ultimately the reason that life is so much more hopeful than much of Ecclesiastes describes it, is that God’s plan for his people is eternal life with him. That is what Jesus came to bring. John 6:40, “For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

And you see, this changes everything. And it also means that living wisely has a greater significance than just for this life. God calls us to live wisely because he wants us to live lives that are pleasing to him. The kinds of things that we have heard about in the earlier part of the sermon about living wisely, matter not only for making this life more pleasant, they matter because, at the end of our lives we want God to say to us, “Well done good and faithful servant.”

That makes everything better. That helps us to deal with the hard things about life that Ecclesiastes is struggling with and which we struggle with as well. The fact that there is more to life than life under the sun puts the suffering and the struggles of this life into a very different perspective. That is why Paul could say in Romans 8:18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

Now, of course, this is only true of those who are in Jesus. The situation of those who refuse Christ is even more dark than the darkest musings of the author of Ecclesiastes because their future beyond this life will make the struggles of this life seem like a picnic. But for those who are in Christ, there is hope. The whole atmosphere is different. It does not mean that we do not struggle and that we do not sometimes find ourselves in dark places like the author of Ecclesiastes did, but it does mean that there is a real solution to the darkness and the disillusionment that Ecclesiastes so often expresses. There is reason for hope. There is reason for joy. The struggles and the frustrations are experienced in a different way. They have meaning in the light of our relationship with God. They are to be experienced in a spirit of submission to God and with the knowledge that he is working everything together for our ultimate good.

And that is the context for seeking to grow in wisdom and to live our lives wisely. Wisdom is an attribute of God and it glorifies him when we reflect him in our lives. And that does not just matter in this life. It matters forever.