

Ecclesiastes 8 • The Authority of the King

Introduction

A common direction given in both Testaments to believers under both Covenants is that they are not automatically exempt from earthly authority just because they recognize a Higher Authority. In fact, believers are supposed to recognize that there is divine direction behind every earthly appointment. This does not mean that rulers and governments automatically do everything in accordance with God's Word and ways, only that God has stipulated that we are not automatically exempt or autonomous from them. We seem to have enough on our plate just in seeking to live in compliance with God's Word when it comes to our neighbors, so it is daunting to consider one's role with a government, which very much engenders or hinders the practice of our faith. Whereas there is the inherent unfairness in the world in general, there is the cyclical shortcomings of every form of human governance.

¹Who is like the wise man and who knows the interpretation of a matter? A man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam.

Read v.1

Q: How is this verse serving as a transition to the next topic of discussion?

A: It is emphasizing the aspect of biblical wisdom which provides personal illumination of specific matters encountered in life. This has more to do with discernment, which is the application of God's Word to determine whether something is from God, of Satan, or a product of the flesh.

Q: Why would this serve as a segue to what follows?

A: God's Word repeatedly affirms that earthly authorities are spiritually influenced, and wisdom that only knows the right from wrong is not as valuable in this situation as knowing why and to what purpose something is taking place.

Application: Biblical wisdom is able to properly apply God's **Word** to discern the true **agenda** and **motivations** taking place.

²I say, "Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God. ³Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases." ⁴Since the word of the king is authoritative, who will say to him, "What are you doing?"

Read v.2-4

Q: Is this suggesting that no matter what, political authority is always right?

A: In monarchies, it is not unusual for those taking up service to the ruler to take an oath, much like when we see each new President of the U. S. sworn in on a Bible. This is a reminder, first of all, that in the Hebrew culture such servants have taken that oath in the name of God. Their promise of obedience to the earthly king is actually an oath of obedience to the Heavenly King.

Q: Why the admonition, "Do not be in a hurry to leave him"?

A: All affairs are conducted in the presence of the ruler. If one is not present, they have lost all chance of influencing him or whatever issue arises.

Q: Why the warning against participation "in an evil matter"?

A: This is best understood as not volunteering. Rulers in these situations, most often surrounded by many counselors, begin to sense who is and is not consistent in their beliefs by their responses. Silence can sometimes send a strong message without inciting an emotional backlash, and does not provide one's consent.

Q: How does the reminder "the word of the king is authoritative" describe this particular situation?

A: A ruler such as a king is autocratic—that is, he has absolute power. No one can simply correct him, and are usually only successful when they manage to get the king to adopt their position as his own.

Q: What kind of approach do these things combine to suggest?

A: One of patience and perseverance.

Application: Those with biblical wisdom understand the true nature of the situation and therefore have the **patience** and **endurance** to champion the right cause at the right time. They does not waste their **influence** on an obviously **lost** cause.

⁵He who keeps a royal command experiences no trouble, for a wise heart knows the proper time and procedure. ⁶For there is a proper time and procedure for every delight, though a man's trouble is heavy upon him. ⁷If no one knows what will happen, who can tell him when it will happen? ⁸No 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.

Read v.5-8

Q: How do we phrase this very same wisdom in our own modern culture?

A: "There's a time and place for everything", or more colloquially, "Pick your battles".

Q: What is the meaning of the caveat, "though a man's trouble is heavy upon him"?

A: It is enduring, being patient for the right time in spite of having a moral concern of something still needing to be addressed.

Q: What are the four realities provided in v.7-8 for which a biblically "wise heart knows the proper time and procedure" and therefore takes into due and careful consideration?

1. (v.7) No one knows the future.
2. (v.8) There are powers beyond all human control. [Note: "Wind" is the same word used in Hebrew for the "Spirit".]
3. (v.8) There are certain commands from the king which never have a chance of being reversed, such as releasing drafted soldiers in a time of war.
4. (v.8) The ends never justify the means, so don't attempt to correct one wrong with even a perceived lesser wrong.

Application: The biblically discerning know the difference between what has a chance of being **changed**, and that which **cannot**. In the Preacher's terms, they know what is **futile** to begin with.

⁹All 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. ¹⁰So 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. ¹¹Because 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. ¹²Although 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. ¹³But 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.

Read v.9-13

Q: How does v.9 provide a segue to this section?

A: Because of the previous mentioned issues, governmental authority has therefore resulted in unjust consequences. This is speaking of the failure of earthly institutions of authority.

Q: What is v.10 describing?

A: It is the contrast between those whose life was wicked versus the righteous—that is, "those who used to go in and out from the holy place". Although they lived in stark contrast to each other, neither has a lasting effect on the living, who pursue their own chosen course. This is speaking of the failure of earthly institutions of religion. (Also, every generation must learn its own lessons and make its own decisions.)

Q: What is v.11 addressing?

A: The irony that the human system of justice actually engenders more injustice. This is speaking of the failure of earthly institutions of justice and morality.

Q: How do v.12-13 sum up the spiritual reality of these earthly shortcomings?

A: What will ultimately result in eternity by God's standards cannot be judged by what takes place within the boundaries of this earthly life.

Q: How does the fear of God trump all of these institutional and manmade shortcomings?

A: Christ is the King, the Priest and the Judge—He is the only one to be truly feared in each instance.

Application: *The biblically discerning do not operate out of fear of earthly **institutions** but in every instance out of respect for Christ Himself, the true **King, Priest and Judge.***

¹⁴There 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 evil men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility. ¹⁵So 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.

Read v.14-15

Q: What is the moral of the story conveyed by v.14?

A: "Virtue is not always rewarded", "Wrongs are not always made right", and perhaps even "Why do good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people?"

Q: Is the author now saying to just ignore these incongruities?

A: We must maintain the context established at the beginning that this is presented from the point of view of someone who "knows the interpretation of a mater" (v.1). In other words, they understand the times they live in and know what to do about it. Such will not exchange the good things life offers for hopeless attempts to thwart or change what cannot be thwarted or changed.

Application: *But endless **worry** about the general state of **evil** in the world is unproductive and futile. We are ultimately responsible for those things in our **sphere of influence**, not for "everything under the sun".*

¹⁶When 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), ¹⁷and 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 though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover. ^{9:1}For I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God. Man does not know whether it will be love or hatred; anything awaits him.

Read v.16-17 & 9:1

Q: What is the irony in the conclusions presented in v.16-17?

A: While the task of seeking wisdom is required in the course of this life, the goal of completely attaining it must be recognized as futile. Even the purest intentions and sincerest devotion cannot achieve equality with God.

Application: *There is a point where knowledge must give way to faith.*

Q: What is the astounding conclusion presented in 9:1?

A: That these very contrasts which man can never come to grips with are a proof in and of themselves of the sovereignty of God. At the end of the exercise, one must acknowledge that it is all in God's hands.

Application: *The biblically discerning are not just models of putting wisdom into practice, but **faith** as well. Their wisdom is proven by their ultimate **trust** in God's **control** of all things.*

Overall Application

*The real “authority of the king” which is proven here is not actually **earthly** authorities, but the authority of the **King of Heaven**. And what began as a quest for **wisdom** can only be successfully achieved on a human level as a test of **faith**.*