

X. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective
From Vanity to Vitality
“Honor the King – Fear God – Seek Wisdom”
Ecclesiastes 8
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Ecclesiastes 8 brings a couple of things to our mind and our focus. I have proposed to you that Solomon is truly the author of Ecclesiastes. Evangelical scholars have discussions about this where some believe from a conservative position that this is a book that is presented very much like a first person sermon. Many believe that this book was actually written to get people back to the Word of God by Ezra, as a first person sermon representing Solomon to get people back to Biblical truth and the wisdom of God, as God's people had been liberated from the Babylonian captivity, restored back to Israel and the initiation of rebuilding the second temple, the Zerubbabel Temple that was rebuilt over the ruins of the Solomonic Temple which had been destroyed in the Babylonian captivity. Therefore that would make this book a 6th century document. I think they have some interesting arguments but I still come out on the side that this is a 10th century document written by Solomon himself and it fits in his trilogy of the Song of Songs, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

I believe the book of Ecclesiastes is the documentation of Solomon by God's grace coming to his senses. Here was a man who began with the gift of wisdom from God and he would amass literally thousands of proverbs. He brings those proverbs to bear for us in a book of Divinely ordained common sense called the book of Proverbs. There are two themes running through it. The first theme is knowledge, understanding and wisdom. To have wisdom, is a lifestyle that reflects life from a Biblical God-centered world and life view from the decisions you make in life. You can't have wisdom without understanding and you can't have understanding without knowledge. Knowledge is here is the truth. Understanding is grasping the perceptions and implications of the truth. As James says, which is the counterpart to the Old Testament literature, wisdom is shown by her fruits in our life (James 3:13).

The second theme in the book of Proverbs is the foundation of wisdom which is the fear of God. That is precisely what God says is the beginning of wisdom. We see God in all of His majesty, transcendence and glory and this transcendent, big God has saved you and dwells within you. The answer to the relationship you are to have with God of trust and intimacy is not based upon getting a small god that fits within you but to see the bigness of God who loves you and will never leave you nor forsake you. The fear, awe, reverence and majesty of God is the beginning of wisdom.

So in Proverbs we see Solomon in his wisdom and then we see him going 'braindead' where he went out into sin and began to live life under the sun, instead of under the wisdom of God who made the sun. In Ecclesiastes we see how Solomon presents to us how God brought him back to his senses. Ecclesiastes is documenting the vanity of living apart from the fear of God and the emptiness of it. Key words in this book are vanity, emptiness, striving after the wind and the book finally gets to the solution in Ecclesiastes 12 which is the fear of God where he gets us back to a God-centered world and life view that is so described in the book of Proverbs. Solomon's third volume is the Song of Songs which declares the glory of God in love that he has for his people through the One who has his wife and loves her dearly.

One of the things that convinces me Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes is that he not only gets us to wisdom through the fear of God by the end of the book but it keeps seeping in through all 12 chapters. He just can't help himself. When you have the answer to something and you want people to know, it's like when I want you to know something in my sermon I know where to take you by the end of the sermon but I'm so excited to get to it that every now and then in the sermon I have to tell you about then, before I get to the end. Solomon does this in Ecclesiastes 5, 7 and we'll see it in this study in chapter 8. Him talking about this emptiness is so overwhelming that he has to tell us how God is working in his life. Another reason I believe Solomon wrote this book of Ecclesiastes in the 10th century is because in each chapter there are things that point directly to him.

Ecclesiastes 8 is one of them. As we read this chapter I think something had an impact in the life of a young man and his three companions four centuries after this was written. Their names were Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. There were three times the people of Israel were captured into the Babylonian captivity and in the first go around they captured the elite, up and coming leadership of Israel and this included these four young men. They put them into their schools and began to challenge them with the wisdom of paganism and these four men were distinctly different in their knowledge, insight, wisdom and appearance. They soon became counselors.

The primer I think they studied on how to counsel, impact, not compromise but have a way that is winsome with pagan kings who can snuff out your life in a moment, is Ecclesiastes 8. The opening verses of this chapter are a primer on how to be a counselor to a king who has full authority, may have evil intentions and needs to hear the truth. This is how you get the truth without losing your life even though you're willing to lose your life. The objective is not to lose your life for Christ's sake but to lose your life for Christ's sake personally to Him but you don't go out seeking to be martyred. You seek to make an impact for Christ, but you're willing to be martyred if it cost you your life for Christ because you have already died to yourself and given yourself to Christ.

I think if you read Daniel 1 through 6 you will see how Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego live out what we will see in Ecclesiastes 8 as to how to be a counselor to a pagan king, having an influence and an impact. That's why I think Ecclesiastes was written in the 10th century due to Daniel being very familiar with this before being taken into captivity. Ecclesiastes 8 starts with a proverb, so let's look now at this chapter.

Ecclesiastes 8:1 says *[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.* It starts off seemingly with a cynicism of vanity of life under the sun. Who can know what's going on? Who can have the wisdom to interpret what is happening by the hand of a sovereign God in life? It seems to be a rhetorical that demands the answer – nobody. Then the proverb turns and you get the sense there are somebodies who have knowledge, understanding and wisdom to see what God is doing. It is not those who live their life under the sun but those who have been given by God's grace the gift to be able to see what God is doing. According to this proverb it is those who have this God given wisdom, knowledge and understanding plus it is written all over their face.

I have seen this. At times I have shared the Gospel with someone and I can sense almost each time what progress or regress we're making in the conversation just by looking at their face. Our face betrays us. He is telling us that there are some people that God by His grace is gifting them with wisdom to understand what is going on because it is written all over their face. A

man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed. God's grace changes, even the face. If you're someone like me who God has given a lot of furrows on my face it's nice to know He has the ability to transform this face. Not only can God do something in my heart and mind but it can show up to some degree in the face. The eyes and the face begin to reveal what is happening in the soul and you see it. It isn't an infallible statement but it is one that is verifiable for you can see it in the lives of people.

I remember this young man I shared the Gospel with after I became a Christian. He was one of my best friends. He was in my wedding and I couldn't wait to tell him that I had become a Christian. I wished you could have seen his face when I was telling him. I knew I was not making headway. I still stayed in touch with him and three years later I received a phone call from him. He asked me if I was coming to Charlotte for Christmas because at the time I lived in Chattanooga and he wanted to take me to lunch when I came. If there was anyone cheaper than me it was my friend Dave so I knew something was up if he wanted to take me out to lunch.

As soon as we sat down for lunch I knew something had happened and sure enough he had become a Christian. The wisdom that began to pour out of him was unbelievable. The insights he had in just the short eight months he had been a Christian was astounding. It was written all over his face. I remember him telling me that he didn't think it was complete that he had become a Christian until he had told me and I told him he didn't need to do that for it to be complete for all he needed to do was trust Jesus. He said 'I know that but I knew if there was anybody that needed to be encouraged it was you because I remember what I said to you the last time you talked to me about this.' I said 'Dave, you didn't need to say a word because it was all over your face when I walked in the door.' You can see when God's grace is giving someone eyes to see and ears to hear. So let's look further in the text.

Ecclesiastes 8:2 says [2] *I say: Keep the king's command, because of God's oath to him.* Someone is expected to have wisdom, a counselor. No one can have wisdom who lives under the sun unless God's grace gives it to them and when this happens it shows up on their face. What do they become? They become good counselors. In fact, some will become counselors to kings. How do you approach it if God has given you wisdom and insight and you're put in a position of being a counselor to someone who is in authority over you? The first thing he says is you keep the king's commands because of God's oath to him.

Paul is calling on this language in Romans 13:1–10. Here Paul tells us to obey those in authority over us for no one is in authority over you apart from God. It doesn't mean that everyone in authority is a believer. It just means that no one gets to a position of governmental authority without a sovereign God for His purposes ordaining it. Now there may be multiple things that He is doing through it but they are in that position by His sovereign oath, God's sovereign command. Therefore as I trust the Lord I'm called to obey those who are in authority over me. What about a pagan king? You obey him unless the one with delegated authority is causing you to transgress God's law, the One who delegated the authority to him.

A prime example for us in the Bible is in Acts 5 when John and Peter are commanded by those in authority in Jerusalem say 'We forbid you to preach the name of Jesus anymore' and they go out and preach the name of Jesus. They say 'Didn't we forbid you?' and they say 'Yes you did but you must now make a judgment. Should we obey God or you? Because your command is in direct conflict with God's command which is 'go and preach the Gospel to all the nations.'" So when your command causes me to transgress God's revealed command now I must obey God because your authority which I respect and bow to has a boundary. That boundary is that with your delegated authority you cannot command me to transgress the authority of the One

who delegated authority to you, but we don't enter into it with our qualifications. We enter into it with a manifested heart of obedience to those in authority.

The Bible doesn't say honor your Christian mother and fathers but it says to honor and obey your father and mother. So those in authority over you are there by God's authority. Are there limitations? Yes but you don't begin by announcing the limitations. You begin with a heart of obedience to those in authority over you. Then Solomon tells us something else about being a counselor. He gives us a primer as to how to be a counselor to those in authority over us if God has given you wisdom. He basically is telling us to show manners.

Ecclesiastes 8:3 says [3] *Be not hasty to go from his presence. Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases.* Back in Solomon's days you didn't just walk into to see kings nor did you just leave them. I remember watching a movie recently on royalty where they had to tell Winston Churchill how to go in and how to go out from the presence of royalty. One of the things they told him was he wasn't to turn his back on the Queen when he walked out. He was to walk out backwards and he was not to leave the room until they dismissed you. You can request to be dismissed but you don't leave the room until they tell you to leave the room. The protocol for that day where absolute authority was in the hands of a king, you were not to go into see them until you were invited and you don't leave until they disinvite you. Do you see what's happening in this passage? You build a respectful relationship with those in authority over you if you're a godly counselor.

Next, he says not to get caught up in a cause that is wrong. You may have to take your stand on a righteous cause. Daniel did that in the fact that he would not participate in pagan worship by participating in the diet of pagan worship. Daniel did that in how he proceeded with his education and a number of place. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego would not bow before that image. In a righteous cause be ready to take your stand but I think one of the dynamics that caused them to be effective is they had not taken up evil causes and they dealt with King Nebuchadnezzar with respect and appropriateness in the relationships. Let's look further.

Ecclesiastes 8:4–5 says [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.* If you're a good counselor you can not only give good counsel to those in authority, you can give yourself good counsel. It is knowing the right time and the right way for what needs to be said.

In premarital counseling one of the things I enjoy doing with couples is going over the three areas they will deal with – Biblical sexuality, financial issues and communication. One of my favorite verses on communication is Ephesians 4:29 which says [29] *Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.* That is revolutionary. Under the sun, do you know why people speak? They speak to get something off of their chest. From a Christian world and life view do you know why Christians speak? Not to get something off their chest onto someone else's but to give grace to the one who hears. It is not to satisfy their own impulses. If you're giving grace you're going to find the right word, not a polluting or unwholesome word. You have a right reason to find the right word and that is to build up. If I have to deal with something negative like sin, I want to build them up. Good counselors find the right word, the right time and the right tone, all for the right reason that their speech would be a means of grace and an asset in their life instead of a liability.

Ecclesiastes 8:6 says [6] *For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him.* You and I don't start out with wisdom. The trouble we have is that

man's wisdom is actually foolishness. God's wisdom to man seems to be foolish and that's a burden on man. Man's wisdom is actually foolishness that is heavy on man. So heavy on us is the irrationality of a life view under the sun that is vanity. We have to be delivered from that by the grace of God so that we have wisdom instead of this heaviness of the foolishness of vanity upon us.

Ecclesiastes 8:7 says [7] *For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?* We can't know what God is doing by our own reasoning. That is why Christianity is not a philosophy. A philosophy is a set of truths that are assumed by the reasoning of man. It is the love of man seeking truth from his own wisdom. We are not philosophers. We seek to know truth, not by our reasoning, but by trusting God's revelation, His Word. We have a presupposition – God's Word is true, let every man be a liar. Therefore we work, not by our reasoning, which is fallible, but we work from God's Word which is infallible. And we reason not to truth, we reason from the truth that has been delivered to us. We now know who God is, who we are and why there is this problem in this world through God's Word. We know the solution to it from God's Word.

Ecclesiastes 8:8 says [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.* So why not go the God who gives life and takes away life to understand why we have life? We don't have the power of life and we can't make life. We were made and sustained by the hand of God and therefore it is God's wisdom as to why He has given us life and why our days end when they do.

Then he finishes this section with Ecclesiastes 8:9 which says [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.* As he lived his life of vanity he looked out at the power of the powerful and there was no one no more powerful than a king in this world, under the sun. Then he looked at the powerless. How can the powerless influence the powerful? The powerless influence the powerful by knowing how to live life by the grace of God for the glory of God informed by the Word of God which is where we get wisdom from beyond the sun. Our Lord says in James 1:5, [5] *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.*

When that wisdom comes it will be written on your face. When that wisdom comes it will change the way you counsel those in authority and how you relate to those in authority. And when wisdom comes you will no longer be powerless for you will actually begin to influence the powerful. I would like to substantiate this again by using Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Let's look at Daniel 1. There are some interesting insights given to us here on how you can see my conviction that Daniel had learned the way to relate to Nebuchadnezzar from this Ecclesiastes 8 passage.

Daniel 1:8–9 says [8] *But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.* [9] *And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs.* The diet of the king came from the sacrifices made in false worship so Daniel would not defile himself with this diet but notice how Daniel came with an appeal. It was not an evil cause but a righteous cause. He came explaining it. He came with an appeal.

The text continues in Daniel 1:10 which says [10] *and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would*

endanger my head with the king.” Daniel wants to obey the king when he says ‘I fear the king’ yet he is asking the eunuch to allow him his diet which could get the eunuch in trouble. If the eunuch goes against the king and Daniel doesn’t show the marks of the king’s diet which they think is wonderful the eunuch could lose his head. Notice Daniel is not deaf to this issue.

*Daniel 1:11–16 says [11] Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, [12] “Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. [13] Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see.” [14] So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. [15] At the end of ten days **it was seen** that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. [16] So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. At the end of ten days you could see it on their faces, in their appearance and in their life. Their obedience was seen in that they were better in appearance.*

Daniel 1:17–21 says [17] As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. [18] At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. [19] And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. [20] And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. [21] And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus.

I thought I would be able to go through all of Ecclesiastes 8 but I am going to go through the rest of it in our next study because I want to make some applications for us as we close this study from what we have covered so far. Did you see how Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were mannerable and how they were willing to be tested? They are being educated in this pagan society but they are taking what they have learned and their wisdom is now in competition with all the other students and it goes beyond them.

I always enjoy around this time of year to go visit our college students at the various colleges they are attending nearby. I love hearing how God is using them where they are, on a team, in a sorority, a fraternity and in the classroom, plus how God is undergirding them. I tell them they want to make sure they get wisdom so they need to be in a good church and a good college ministry for as they do this they start having influence and it is influence that is way beyond their years. I see that with some of you in your businesses and where you’re functioning at in life. It is because you enter into the lives of those who don’t yet know the Lord who are in authority over you, not despising their authority but honoring it and then influencing them, not with an arrogance of what you know, but with humility, mannerable, winsome, approachable.

Not only is Daniel going to have influence with Nebuchadnezzar but he will have influence over five kings and two empires. The longevity of his influence is amazing. All the evidence with the vocabulary that is used is that Daniel and his three companions were taken into captivity right around 13 years of age. They were probably the age of what we know as 7th and 8th graders in our culture. I would love to meet who they had as their pastor and their parents, because I think even in the 6th century junior high kids didn’t get there automatically. I think some parents were really engaged. I don’t think they avoided the temple and synagogue, I think they were engaged. They were not only families in a church but the church was in their family and then when this drastic, horrendous moment of being taken into captivity happened, it simply

was sending four people who were going to effect the course of history into empires, because of what had been put into their lives.

Twice a year I meet with our youth in an evening that is called 'stump the chump.' I'm laboring and lobbying that it be changed to 'stamp the champ' but I'm not quite there yet. As I sat around the table with our senior and student ministry staff I was absolutely astounded by the questions I was being asked by these youth. It was good theological questions like how do I understand who I am, how do I influence my classroom, how do I answer this and they were amazing weighty questions. I thank the Lord for our student ministry staff because I don't think it happened without them and what they do and for the parents. Those parents I know have their kids on a track. It shows up in their manners, their winsomeness, their knowledge, their understanding and desire for wisdom as well as the wisdom they're communicating.

I think this Ecclesiastes 8 is a very powerful text. In my humble opinion I think it was a text that influenced these four youths hundreds of years later that they would have read this and understood how to act with a king when you have been put in a position to talk to that king. I had come back from a study sabbatical and at the church I was at there were two Sunday schools and two worship service that happened simultaneously. So after one worship service the Sunday schools were letting out to come in the next worship service and I left to make my way to the bathroom between services. As I went in there were two young six grade boys. One of them said to me 'Pastor Reeder, we have missed you the last few weeks. We are so glad to have you back. Did you have a good time, Pastor Reeder?' I said "Yes" and I shared some things with them. His companion came up right after we started talking and said 'Hey Harry, how's it going?' It was cute but I think I know what's going on in those families.

It's amazing how we can contribute to the wisdom of others and you see it through winsomeness, manners and respectfulness. Isn't it interesting when William Wilberforce decided to get rid of slavery, he started an institution called the Society of the Reformation of Manners? This is just wrong. How do I communicate respect? How do I pick the right time, the right words, and the right cause? God gives you that wisdom and when He does it will be written on your face. And it will bless those to whom you have influence in life. Let's pray.

Prayer:

God, thank You so much for this wonderful text of Scripture. Thank You for the privilege to walk through it and see its impact, not only of what You had taught Solomon as You brought him back to sensibility but how it would be used in the lives of people like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and people like us. God as we go into this coming week and in some way we have people in authority over us, may we learn to use right words, at the right time, in the right way for the right reasons. May we show the wisdom of infallible Your Word and not the fallibility of our reasoning to truth, winsomely and reasonably to others. Then God, bless us in our families, the community, the neighborhood, jobs, schools, teams and all the places we find ourselves and those who are under us may we bless them with wisdom and those who are above us may we influence them with wisdom from above, all for the glory of God, by the grace of God, with the wisdom that comes from the Word of God, by the power of the Spirit of God. I pray this in the Name of the King of Kings, Jesus, Amen.