

Living Wisely in Days of Evil Kings

Ecclesiastes 8:1 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 [time and judgment] 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.

(Ecclesiastes 7:15-29)

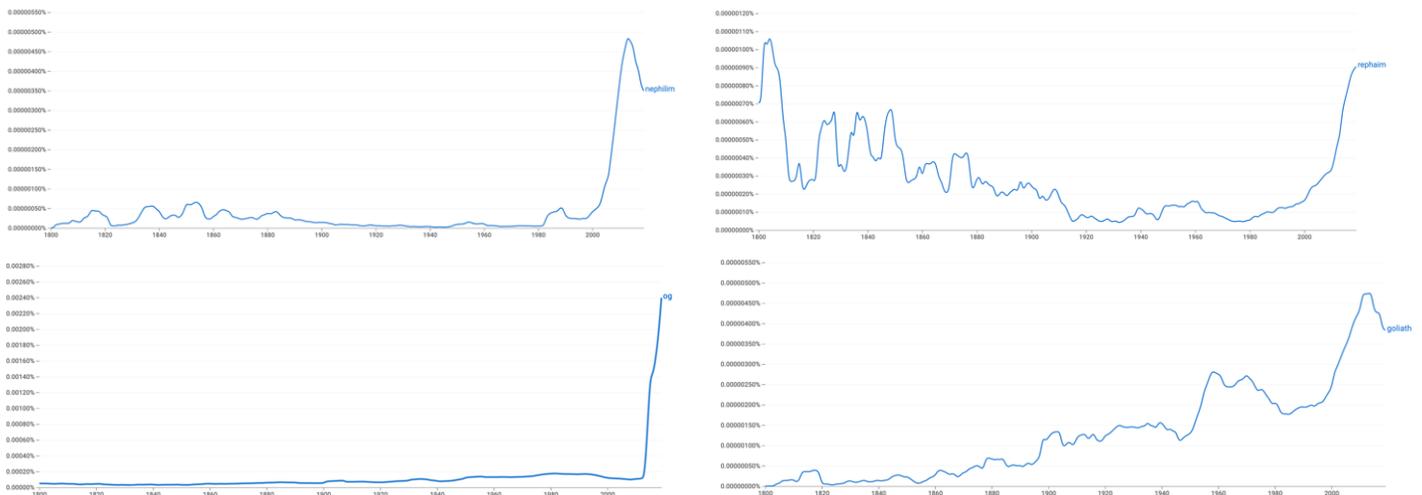
Unprecedented Times and the End of Days

We live in **unprecedented times**. Every generation says that. Not every generation can say it truthfully. We have the technology to send space probes beyond the solar system. We can find nearly any word penned in the last 500 years in about .5 seconds. We have the power to obliterate life from the face of the earth, multiple times over with multiple methods of doing it. We have the science to manipulate and co-mingle human DNA and create brand new species. We have incredibly powerful philanthropists, economists, and politicians with the financial, political, and commercial means to carry out their stated goal of vastly reducing human population, some say to below 500,000,000—necessarily murdering 13 out of 14 people to get there. These same people also have the stated goal of creating a one-world human utopia made in their image.

What happens to people's minds in a culture with such power when one or more of these more sinister agendas have been deployed before their very eyes? One thing is that **people naturally begin wondering about *the end of days***. For some, their wonder turns into unhealthy **obsession** coupled

with a kind of **paralysis** that is increasingly incapable of living life as they should as such events unfold.

As an example, ten years ago I wrote a book on fascinating but “out-there” topic of the **Nephilim** (**Gen 6:4**). I had been learning about these creatures and took a deep dive into the literature on them at the time. According to the *Google Books Ngram Viewer*, there has been a massive rise in the usage of words like “Nephilim,” “Og,” and “Goliath” in the last twenty years:



Top (left to right): Nephilim, Rephaim. Bottom (left to right): Og, Goliath.¹
Chart tracks from 1800 – 2019.

What accounts for such a rise? I speculate it is because several books and documentaries gained traction in popular culture, which itself has been fueled by end-times speculation for

¹ Screenshots taken Aug 23, 2022. Thanks to Michael Emadi for sending me the original Nephilim graph out of the clear blue a couple of weeks ago. I didn’t know you could search words like this.

several decades. Indeed, nearly every book or discussion ended up taking the discussion in the direction of **how the Nephilim will return at the end of days** because as Jesus says, those will be like the days of Noah (**Matt 24:37-38**). And of course, those days are almost certainly our days. And in light of this, some have become virtually obsessed with this topic in an unhealthy way.

Such **speculations are not new**. People have been predicting the end of days **since Zoroaster**, who 3,000 years ago seems to have predicted that they would take place about 3,000 years from his lifetime.² Often, but not always, these predictions occur on key dates (**500 AD**: Hippolytus, Julius Africanus, Irenaeus; **1000 AD**: Pope Sylvester II; **1504**: Sandro Bottecelli [counting the 3 ½ year tribulation he was in]; **2000**: Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, Sun Myung Moon, Jonathan Edwards) or during terrible events that people are currently living through. In other words, basically you can't find a time in history when someone hasn't predicted that

² There is no consensus on when Zoroaster lived. I've seen dates that range between 2,000 BC to 1,400 BC, to 700 BC. The religion developed a 12,000 year "world year" divided into four periods of 3,000 years apiece. The last 3,000 years would culminate in something like evil being finally defeated by a Messiah like figure. See **Mary Boyce**, "On the Antiquity of Zoroastrian Apocalyptic," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 47.1 (1984): 67. 57-75; **Massoume Price**, "Zoroastrian Myth of the End," *Iran Chamber Society*, https://www.iranchamber.com/religions/articles/zoroastrian_myth_end.php.

The End is Nigh. How much more when you live in truly unprecedented times?

Why are people so infatuated with these questions? It is often a coping mechanism that seeks some kind of certainty in very uncertain times. It's something solid to stand on when all other ground is sinking sand. It's completely psychologically understandable. But perhaps more, it is because for Christians, we have a lot of prophecy about the end of days. Presumably, to at least some extent, this should be discernable.

Enter the ancient prophet, Daniel. We are introduced to Daniel with the description that he was “without blemish, of good appearance, and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king’s palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans” (Dan 1:4). We are quickly told that Daniel would not compromise his dietary laws and he convinced by chief of the eunuchs to let him eat only vegetables, so long as his appearance remained good (12-13). Not only did it remain good, but it was better than before (15), and the king showed great favor to Daniel (19-20).

Over the course of the next few chapters, we learn that the kings of Persia have unsettling dreams and visions, and

only Daniel is wise enough to interpret them (see chs. 2, 4, 5). All the other seers just told the king what he wanted to hear. The second half of the book sees Daniel himself having multiple dreams, dreams about the future. These are detailed dreams that to greater or lesser extent are also interpreted. Because of Daniel's great wisdom in being able to interpret such mantic (future-oriented) revelations, his countenance is said to shine. He has been given "light" and understanding and wisdom (5:11; 14) because he can unravel the riddles and loosen the knots (12). In this, Daniel is not unlike Moses, whose face shone because he had been talking to God (Ex 34:29). It is no coincidence that Moses is called the greatest of the prophets of the OT (Deut 18:15), a prophet that only Jesus himself would surpass (Acts 3:22). It is precisely because he has such obviously visible light to his appearance that Daniel is called upon by king Belshazzar to interpret the writing on the wall. Now you can see why it was so important to explain his appearance at the beginning of the book.

Daniel's book about the future is matched in the Bible only by Revelation, though we have many similar kinds of prophecies scattered in the midst of many of the books of both the Old and New Testaments. Both give many details

about the end, details that are often disagreed upon, but that often at least appear to line up with things happening in the present. This has been true in all generations to an extent, but especially in our own, because it is so unprecedented. This then is a major reason why Christians are especially drawn towards wanting to know if they are living in the end of days when they see such incredible and often terrifying things happening in their world.

Ecclesiastes 8:1-9—Context and Structure

I never dreamed that this would be a subject for a single sermon on Ecclesiastes. And in fact, it will only really serve as [an introduction](#) to this one. Nevertheless, it is a subject that necessarily grounds our passage, both directly and indirectly. We are looking at [Ecclesiastes 8:1-9](#). This is the first half of chapter 8. It is possible to see the first verse of this chapter related directly to the last one, as it begins “[Who is like *the wise*? And who *knows*...](#)” (1) and ends, “[Even though a wise man claims to know...](#)” (17). As such, many see the whole thing as a unit.

Some see this first verse as **the end of the last unit**, and indirectly, it is certainly related to it.³ But because there is enough of a distinction between the first and second half of the chapter, and because **vv. 1-9** are bound together with catchwords such as “**word**” (*dbr*: 1, 3, 4, 5); “**man**” (1, 6, 8, 9); “**know**” (1, 5x2, 7); “**who**” (1, 4, 7); “**wise**” (1, 5); “**power**” (*slt*; 4, 8, 9); along with the biblical meaning of “**interpretation**” (1) which fits perfectly with **2-9**, it is best to see **8:1-9** as a unit, especially for the purposes of preaching.⁴

The text itself is **not chiasmic**. Like the previous chapter, it appears to many to be talking about **two almost unrelated ideas**. For example,

- I. Instruction about using wisdom before the king (vv. 1–5)
- II. Reflection on human inability to know the future and to control the present (vv. 6–9)⁵

Or

1. “No One is Like the Wise! (8:1)
2. “The Word of the King is Supreme (8:2-9).⁶

³ This is true in as much as both units deal with judgment at the end of days. This is brought out particularly nicely in the Targum.

⁴ I found Scott Jones persuasive. See **Scott C. Jones**, “Qohelet’s Courtly Wisdom: Ecclesiastes 8:1-9,” *CBQ* 68.2 (April 2006): 212-13. https://www.academia.edu/37017443/Qohelets_Courtly_Wisdom_Ecclesiastes_8_1_9.

⁵ **Sidney Greidanus**, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 204.

⁶ **Tremper Longman**, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 208-09.

But it is just here that **the lynchpin to our text** must be looked at, so that we can see that in fact, the instructions about using wisdom before the king are directly related to our human inability to know the future, via **the mysterious first verse** that has left many a scholar baffled. This verse is the reason I introduced the subject I did at the beginning, and as we are going to see, it has everything to do with **vv. 2-9** which give us some incredibly pertinent wisdom regarding living wisely in the days of evil kings.

Ecclesiastes 8:1—A Wise Interpretation

Ecc 8:1 is **divided into two halves**. It says,

“Who is like the wise?

A man’s wisdom makes his face shine,

And who knows the interpretation of a thing?

and the hardness of his face is changed.”

As I said, many don’t know what to do with this verse. Why is it here? What is it talking about? Does this wrap up end of the last chapter with its discussion of depravity, helping us conclude that really there are people who are not totally depraved because they are wise? No, that would **obliterate the message** of the previous section, since it would be saying that

in fact there are some who are not depraved, but wise.⁷ Is it just a **stand-alone proverb** that helps us know that we should learn how to interpret the world properly so that our faces will shine like the sun? What would even be the point?

It is just here that we need to remember two things that we've seen with Daniel. First, recall **Daniel's shining face**. In this verse, we see the same kind of idea. A man's wisdom *makes his face shine*. The second is that his face shone because he was able **to interpret dreams**. That is, he met with God himself who told him the truth of a secret matter. Our verse also has this idea of **"interpreting."** **"Who knows the interpretation of a thing?"**

The key to our entire passage is the meaning of **"interpretation"** in **vs. 1**. Those who get into Jewish studies will recognize the word *peshar*, here. **Pesharim** are commentaries found at the Dead Sea on Scripture. Most modern commentaries on Ecclesiastes just take for granted that this verse is referring to exegeting the Bible, like a pastor or professor or dedicated layman would do.

However, a recent study has demonstrated that this word (and root) occurs **"exclusively in texts that have been**

⁷ **Longman** takes the verses' halves as a rhetorical "no one is wise!" followed by a sarcastic response that his own expression remains hardened and dour. In light of Jones' exegesis, this does not make good sense.

associated with mantic wisdom”⁸ (see Gen 40-41; Dan 2, 4, 5, 7; Ecc 8:1). “Mantic” means “relating to divinity or prophecy.” Mantic wisdom is therefore the ability to interpret the future via prophetic dreams, visions, and utterances. This is precisely what we talked about to begin the sermon.

Even more specifically, such wisdom is found only in the context of the royal court in the Bible. Joseph and Daniel are the two men who have this ability to interpret in Scripture. Both do so for the Pharaoh and kings of Persia. “The contextual combination is surprisingly uniform in all the documents: it is about an interpretation of a problem presented by a king. The Old Testament specification, especially from the Book of Daniel, shows that *peshar* always represents the interpretation of dreams and signs, but never the interpretation of a text.”⁹ Is it a coincidence that the rest of our passage has as its subject matter how one should act in the presence of the king?

Then there is the shining face. This is something that is granted to the seer who interprets the future; both in the Bible and around the ANE. We’ve already seen it in Daniel. Here is one from Babylon:

⁸ Jones, 213.

⁹ Translated by Google Earth from the German in H. J. Fabry and U. Dahmen, “פֶּשֶׁר,” TWAT (*Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*), 6.810-16, here 812. Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1973). Cited in Jones, 213.

You grant wisdom, O Shamash, to humankind,
You grant those seeking you your raging, *fierce light*.
You make their omens the right ones for them ...
You probe their future in every way.
You grant wisdom to the limits of the inhabited world.

(*Hymn to Shamash* 149-53)¹⁰

So let's put **vs. 1** into this context. When the Preacher asks, "Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?" he is not asking a general question, but a very specific one. The answer is **not** "*no one*." **Nor** is the answer, "*Anyone who goes to seminary or takes a class on hermeneutics*." He is talking about the prophets—men like Joseph and Daniel. Men *not* like you and I!

That man stands on a regular basis before the king. But he is not putting on a good face in the king's presence (to get ahead of ourselves). That man's face shines because **God grants him understanding into the future** and this understanding changes the harshness of his face which was due to the consternation of not being able to interpret the riddle. It also shows that he was in the presence of the Divine and therefore must be heard by the king.

¹⁰ Trans. Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (2nd ed; 2 vols; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1996), 2.537; in W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960); 135. Cited in Jones, 216.

Ecclesiastes 8:2-5—Wise Action Before the King

It is into this context that we now move to vv. 2-5. These verses describe *how a man should ideally behave before a king*—even a king who is ruthless, vile, and commits heinous crimes against humanity. It gives three words to the wise. First, “Keep the king’s command” (2). Second, “Be not hasty to go from his presence” (3a). Third, “Do not take your stand in an evil cause” (3b). To what do these refer?

The first, *keep the king’s command*, is simple enough. He is the king. He was put in place by God himself. He was given authority by God himself. Now, we will come back to this point more than once as we move along, but I must point out here that *this does not just apply to an OT king of Israel*.¹¹ Daniel and Joseph are both great examples. They each served under foreign kings; one in Babylon, the other in Egypt. They served in the court of those kings and obeyed their commands such that each rose to very high ranks in the respective kingdoms. They did not say, “You are a pagan, I cannot obey you.” In our context, where we are not under a king, we need to remember Romans 13. “There is no

¹¹ Every nation believed in the “divine right of kings,” that is that the gods put the kings in their place to rule in their stead. This is exactly what we see in the OT by the way, where Yahweh chose David to be his representative, his king. A biblical worldview would agree to a point with the pagans but would say more specifically that Yahweh gave the fallen gods to rule over the nations (Deut 4:19-20), and that those fallen angels assigned men to rule for them.

authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom 13:1). “Authority” is the word *exousia*, and it is applied to both human and supernatural rulers in the Scripture. Therefore, the Preacher would say to us, keep the authorities command.¹²

Second, *be not hasty to go from his presence*. In the original context of someone like Joseph or Daniel, this would have been easily understandable. They literally served in the king’s court. Ryken puts it nicely. “When he tells us not to be hasty, the Preacher is not telling us how fast to walk when we leave the White House. In the ancient world, an audience with the king was a matter of life and death.”¹³ Think of Esther, the very queen herself who was nevertheless terrified to walk into Ahasuerus’ presence, lest she be put to death. When she was finally prepared through fasting and prayer these were her solemn words, “If I perish, I perish” (Est 4:16). To turn your back on the king and quickly walk away from him was a massive sign of disrespect. It should be obvious that even today with lesser magistrates, the same would be true.

¹² The American context is unique in that technically speaking, our authority is a document: The Constitution. All human “authorities” are really servants of this document. Therefore, this idea would apply to each of us. However, the kings of the nations were also supposed to be “servants” of the Most High and the word here is directed, at least in part, to obeying those human kings ... even if they are wicked. We will see more of how this applies today as we move along.

¹³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 186.

Third, *do not take your stand in an evil cause*. Why might someone rush out from the king's presence? More than likely, it is because **he didn't like the king's command or the king himself!** He didn't want to go and carry out his will. Thus, **the evil cause** would seem to be either to not carry out his edict or perhaps a plot against the king's life! Israel knew plenty of those **conspiracies** after Solomon died. In fact, "**conspiracy**" is used more times of the overthrow of a king than anything else in the Bible (**1Kg 16:20; 2Kg 12:20; 14:19; 15:15; 30**; etc.). Again, think of Daniel. He never tried to overthrow any of the wicked kings he served in a coup d'état. Rather, he obeyed the kings he served.

Of course, there is a caveat here, as most know. But before getting to the questions many are naturally asking themselves, let's go back and look at **the reasons given** for each of these three pieces of sage advice. The Preacher isn't just giving you some command that you are to blindly follow. In fact, of the three, the only imperative is the first: *Keep the king's command*. Rather than Mosaic law, this is wisdom he is telling you. It is as if he is saying, "**Look. If you don't want to be a fool, if you don't want to face the consequences of your actions, listen to me and do these things.**" Thus, he gives several reasons to back up his advice.

First, keep the king's command, *because of God's oath to him* (2). This is tricky to understand. It could be read as referring to taking the LORD's Name in vain. The Targum reads, "*Be careful with your mouth concerning the decree of the king to keep what he commands you and in the matter of the oath of the Lord be careful that you do not take the name of his Memra' in vain.*" What does this mean? "R. Jose said in the name of R. Bun, 'I (say), Keep the King's command.' (8:2) I will keep the command of the King of Kings who said to me at Sinai 'I am the Lord your God' (Ex. 20:2) and 'in regard to' (8:2) refers to 'You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.' " (y. *San.* 3:5.)"¹⁴ In Christian terms, you watch your tongue and do not blaspheme, even if you don't like the king. This is a rather odd interpretation, but possible.

It could mean, "Keep a king's utterance as though it concerned a vow to God."¹⁵ In other words, this would apply to someone like Daniel very specifically, because he served in the court. Take your job extremely seriously, as if it was a vow to God. Anyone *working in government today* could apply this quite easily, even if they hate the very thing they

¹⁴ Céline Mangan, John F. Healey, and Peter S. Knobel, *The Aramaic Bible: The Targum of Job and The Targum of Proverbs and The Targum of Qohelet*, ed. Kevin Cathcart, Michael Maher, and Martin McNamara, vol. 15 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Robert Alter's translation.

are working for. You keep the command because you take your oath's seriously because you are a Christian.

It could mean, as the ESV seems to imply, that you keep the king's command because God is the one who put him there. That is, **God made an oath to the king** that he would rule over the people. To thus not keep the king's command is **to not respect God's authority**. Whatever the case, whether it refers to your watching your tongue because you are a Christian, your obeying the human ruler because you love God, or your obeying him because God put him in authority, these are all biblical and good things to consider.

The **second** two pieces of advice continue addressing the king. Now, the Targum has introduced an interesting nuance here. What if the King is God? If it is the King of kings, do not be hasty to go from his presence and do not take your stand in an evil cause because "*he does whatever he pleases*" (**Ecc 8:3**). If you say this is not possible, then you have never heard of the apostate or the blasphemer. King **Nebuchadnezzar** learned this the hard way and came to understand that "*all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What have you done?'*" (**Dan 4:35**; cf.

Ps 135:6). This in fact is probably the reason the Targum interprets it this way, because in the next reason the Preacher says, “For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, ‘*What are you doing?*’” (**Ecc 8:4**). Nebuchadnezzar and Ecclesiastes are very similar. If this is the idea, then **do not kick against the goads**, do not strike your fist at God. Do not turn your back on him. Do not try to carry out a conspiracy of your own making against him, because he is the Almighty. Doing this is very foolish.

But, of course, it more naturally refers to a **human king**—a vile and corrupt human king. In this case, even if you disagree or think the king mad or evil, “**he does whatever he pleases.**” He’s the king. Substitute a tyrannical government like Soviet Russia or Communist China or the rogue American Administration here. They do whatever they please. Again, their word is supreme. Who can say “**what are you doing**” and not pay personally for it? What are you going to do to stop them? Good luck with that.

Now, again, in our current political climate, **I know what many are thinking**. Not all. Some Christians love this kind of talk; all Christians should, for it is biblical. But some Christians see more to it than this, and they want me to **stop talking like an absolutist**. Before I get to that, let me explain.

Nothing I've said here is in fact absolute. That's because nothing *the Preacher has said* is absolute. Recall, I said these are not part of the law code of Moses. This is the Preacher giving *wise, sage advice* based on what he's seen under the sun. **Vs. 5** is the key to understanding this point. It says, "Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way."

This **first half** of this is a **practical point**. Do you want to go to jail? Do you want to be thrown into a pit of lions? Do you want to have the IRS's new 87,000-armed agents come to your door? Keep the command and you will know no evil thing. **The tyrant will have no reason to come after you.** Even if you serve in the court, let alone if you are just an average relatively anonymous citizen. I think this is precisely what is behind **Paul's point to Timothy** when he says, "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (**1Tim 2:1-2**). Remember, this is a man writing this letter right after getting out of *prison*! He knew about unjust tyrants and corrupt government officials who had it out for Christians. His point is the same as Ecclesiastes'. You will know no evil

thing; you will live a quiet and peaceful life. Pray for those who persecute you.

In the movie *The Patriot*, Mel Gibson's character **Benjamin Martin** is a veteran of the French and Indian War, and a man who has seen much carnage and death. In the years following the War and leading up to the Revolution, Martin has become a quiet family man, a widower with seven children, who did all he could to avoid fighting in the Revolutionary War because he knew well the personal and corporate costs.

Early in the movie, in **the local assembly hall**, as the town is meeting to figure out what they are going to do, many shouts of South Carolina joining the Revolution cause Martin to stand up and ask, **"Tell me, why should I trade one tyrant, three thousand miles away, for three thousands tyrants, one mile away? An elected legislature can trample a man's rights just as easily as a King can."**

Someone asks him, **"Captain Martin, I understood you to be a Patriot."**

Martin replies, **"If you mean by a Patriot, am I angry at the Townsend Acts and the Stamp Act? Then I'm a Patriot. And what of the Navigation Act? Should I be permitted to sell my rice to the French traders on Martinique? Yes, and it's an intrusion into my affairs that I can't... legally. And**

what of the greedy, self-serving **** who sit as Magistrates on the Admiralty Court and have fined nearly every man in this room. Should they be boxed about the ears and thrown onto the first ship back to England? I'll do it myself.

And do I believe that the American colonies should stand as a separate, independent nation, free from the reins of King and Parliament? I do, and if that makes a Patriot, then I'm a Patriot." Martin grows more serious. "But if you're asking whether I'm willing to go to war with England, the answer is, no. I've been to war and I have no desire to do so again."¹⁶

As the movie moves along, of course, there is a major turn. Martin is thrust into the war against his will after his young son is murdered by an evil British tyrant before his eyes. As the Revolution unfolds, many of the same men so eager to fight end up dying—many while on leave as the same tyrant burns the church to the ground with all of the townspeople inside. It's a brutal scene that captures the horror of war.

Ecclesiastes 8:5b-9—Solider Grounding for Wise Action

As there is a turn in *The Patriot*, so there is a turn in our text. "Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing"

¹⁶ *The Patriot*, Directed by Roland Emmerich. Columbia Pictures, 2000.

is followed immediately by, “the wise heart will know the proper time and the just way.” Many commentators see this as meaning that the wise and just man will know how to answer the king so that he will not get into trouble. This is how Jerome took it with his translation, “The heart of a wise man understandeth time and *answer*” (Eccl. 8:5 DRA).

While this is certainly a possible translation, Jones has pointed out that in Ecclesiastes the word Jerome translates as “answer” (*mishpat*) only occurs in the context of *future judgment* (11:9; 12:14) or in questions of *justice* (3:16; 5:7). The future! That’s how we began this morning. Furthermore, the word “time” which occurs 35 times, is only once used of an appropriate time. All the rest refer to *God’s* timing, God’s sovereignty.¹⁷ This makes Jerome’s interpretation doubtful.

The ESV’s interpretation allows you to consider not only what will be well for you by obeying the king, but whether or not the king is a tyrant and *what, if anything, you should do about it*. The wise heart must ponder long and hard over the totality of the situation, not just blindly follow some unexplained rule. Sometimes, he may choose to go to the lion’s den. Daniel didn’t *always* obey.

¹⁷ Jones, 224.

Sometimes, he may need to fight. This is one of the reasons I brought up the Targum, for there is ambiguity here in what king is actually in view? Could it not be both the human and divine kings? And if so, would not this mandate that we consider the King of king's righteous laws in the face of criminal behavior of despotic governors?

You see? **The Preacher is not giving an absolute command to follow authority blindly.** The Scripture knows no such thing as what is being taught by many Christians using **Romans 13** as if it is the only thing the Bible says about these matters. **The ultimate authority is not man, but God.** Sometimes, tyrants create laws and force Christians to be silent about their faith. The Apostles learned this early on when the local Jewish authorities said, **“We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's [Jesus'] blood upon us”** (**Acts 5:28**). **“But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than men’”** (**29**).

Think of how they **forced us to shut down our churches** in a nation where this is illegal. They did it under a pretense that there was such a massively deadly disease breaking out that for the good of everyone, we should close down. Fifteen days to flatten the curve, after all. At the time, this was

so unprecedented, that it seemed reasonable. Give your government the benefit of the doubt.

But it quickly became that 15 days to flatten the curve was 2+ years and some churches still would not open their doors. And now we know, this was all a lie anyway. [Deborah “The Scarf-Lady” Birx](#) admitted in her new book,

No sooner had we convinced the Trump administration to implement our version of a two-week shutdown than I was trying to figure out how to extend it. Fifteen Days to Slow the Spread was a start, but I knew it would be just that. I didn't have the numbers in front of me yet to make the case for extending it longer, but I had two weeks to get them.¹⁸

Do Christians even care anymore about the consequences to Christians and to the civilization [if we no longer worship together](#)? Have we become so gnostic that in-body, face-to-face worship can be replaced by virtual church? Do we even think that's a problem? Do we think that little of the public, corporate means of grace; the preaching of the word of God, the fellowship of the believers, the needed

¹⁸ [Deborah Birx](#), *Silent Invasion* (Harper, 2022). As discussed in [Michael Senger](#), “Deborah Birx’s Guide to Destroying a Country From Within,” *Brownstone Institute* (July 14, 2022), <https://brownstone.org/articles/deborah-birxs-guide-to-destroying-a-country-from-within/>.

physical contact and communion we have with one another through Christ that we just blindly parrot Romans 13 as an excuse to comply with ungodly tyranny?

Sometimes, kings and tyrants and governments commit such heinous acts of lawlessness and morally disgusting outrage that **it forces a Christian to obey God by fighting against that authority**. Of course, each must count the cost. Sometimes that may be with **the sword of the pen** and word. Sometimes with **simple protests or voting**, which can be incredibly powerful. Sometimes in a **Revolutionary War**. Each must do what their own conscience being driven by God's word is telling them.

But honestly, **this is precisely what I think the Preacher is doing**. Here, it is important to show you that **vv. 2-5** have in the **original background** one of the oldest books we have. It is called **Ahiqar**. It is a story followed by a series of proverbs that is first attested in the 7th-6th centuries BC. It is the oldest of all the pseudepigrapha we have. Ahiqar was a wise scribe and counselor to the kings of Assyria. Sounds like Joseph and Daniel. His story is very pertinent to what we've been talking about.

The sage, advanced in years and having no son to succeed him, decides to adopt his nephew Nadin and teach him all his wisdom. The young man is educated and presented to Esarhaddon [see 1Kg 19:37], and in time takes his uncle's place at court. Nadin, instead of dealing kindly with his uncle, plots to discredit him and manages to convince Esarhaddon that the old man is scheming to overthrow the throne. In a rage, the king orders Ahiqar killed. However, the officer sent to carry out the death sentence turns out to be an old friend of Ahiqar, whom the latter once rescued from death. The two of them concoct a plan by which a slave is substituted for Ahiqar and killed in his place.¹⁹

Ahiqar has many passages that are similar to portions of the OT, and Ecclesiastes has more than more. Here is a passage that sounds very much like **Ecc 8:2-5**:

⁸⁴ Do not suppress the word of a king; let it be healing for your heart.

A king's speech is soft yet it is sharper and mightier than a double-edged knife.

⁸⁵ Here is a difficult thing before you: Do not stand against the face of a king.

His rage is swifter than lightning. As for you, guard yourself.

¹⁹ J. M. Lindenberger, "Ahiqar: A New Translation and Introduction," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament: Expansions of the "Old Testament" and Legends, Wisdom, and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*, vol. 2 (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1985), 479.

Do not let him show it because of your speech, lest you die before your time.

⁸⁷ See the good of a king. If something is commanded to you, it is a burning fire.

Hurry, do it! Do not let it be kindled against you, and do not sit on your hands.

⁸⁸ Moreover, the word of the king is as the delight of the heart.

How can wood contend with fire, flesh with knife, man with king?

(Ahiqar 84-88)²⁰

How interesting that we had *all that political intrigue* from the same man who said this! Whether or not Ecclesiastes' wisdom came first, or it was reflecting that of Ahiqar, the point remains that they overlap, and the readers of that day would very much have realized it, as it was one of the most popular books for hundreds of years. Jones says of this that we see this overlap “*in order to bring an audience oriented toward the future* back into the pressing reality of the present by emphasizing the power of the king's decree and the powerlessness of his subjects to resist it.”²¹

²⁰ This is the translation of Jones without the brackets and parenthesis.

²¹ Jones, 220.

This finally gets us back to the opening of the sermon. There is nothing new under the sun. In days of dark political maleficence, people's minds, especially the Christian's, *go to the future*. We want to know that Christ is coming back *in our times*. Thus, we start interpreting the Scriptures in such a way that we convince ourselves that this will happen. They were no different back then. *They had expectations of a coming Messiah* just like we do (including the Zoroastrians). And their expectations were that he would set Israel free, punish evil empires, and set the world right.

But it is just into this kind of a setting, where the Preacher has already asked, “*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*” refers to the likes of *Daniel* and the other prophets. What it does not refer to – *is you or I*. But this is what people want. Remember Collective Soul's song “Shine?”

*Give me a word, Give me a sign
Show me where to look. Tell me, what will I find?
Lay me on the ground, and fly me in the sky
Show me where to look. Tell me, what will I find?
Heaven let your light shine down²²*

²² *Collective Soul*, “Shine,” *Hints Allegations and Things Left Unsaid*, Atlantic (1993).

None of us **sits before a king** day to day. None of us **hears directly from God** prophecies of the future. None of us gets **the interpretation** directly from God such that we are infallible and our faces shine. This is precisely why, though I might speculate personally about something like the return of the giants, I will not write or talk much about it. It is a mostly fruitless exercise grounded in giving a hope that may not even be true in our lifetime. Even if it is, we should always be looking for the Return of the King.

But playing into this hunger sometimes **feeds the beast**. This beast is the very thing Ecclesiastes now turns his attention to starve—starve with wisdom on how to think properly about the future. What should be our proper grounding as we live in tumultuous times? Future speculation? No. But **future certainty** rooted in present wise action in the face of evil tyrants. Jones says, “**In Eccl 8:5b-8, Qohelet turns to address the event for which his audience groans, as they labor under incompetent rulers (10:6) in circumstances of economic and political oppression (4:1; 5:7; 6:10).**” As we move into these verses we are going to see a **very pointed discussion about the future** combined with **not so subtle jabs against evil kings**. This is all made possible by the transitional second half of **vs. 5**.

“For there is a time and a way for everything, although man’s trouble lies heavy on him” (6). This language takes us back to Ecclesiastes 3’s poem on time and is one of the reasons why learning to read the book chiastically is helpful. That poem on time refers to *God’s time*. God has appointed times for everything. The word order is important. There is a time for every matter (Ecc 3:1: לְכֹל-הַפֶּזַז וְעֵת, *we'eth lekhol-hefets*). But men, as we saw in the last chapter, corrupt them. It’s what we do. Ecc 8:6 sees the reversal of the word-order. For every matter, there is a time (לְכֹל-הַפֶּזַז יֵשׁ עֵת, *ki lekhol-hefets yesh 'eth*). Whose matter? The king’s matter, not God’s matter; the matter that the wise man must contemplate at the end of vs. 6. To put it another way, the king thinks he can do whatever he wants, and this causes those he is persecuting trouble that lies heavy on them. But God has a time, and if the king tries to push his own time and matter, there’s going to be trouble ... *for him*. He is not omnipotent, God is. This takes us into a most certain future.

“For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?” (7). Who is the “man” [he] here? It could be the men the king is persecuting. They want to know the future. Who can tell them? They aren’t Daniel. The idea here is to keep us focused on the here and now and

to ground our lives of persecution in something a bit different than only the hope of rescue. This is the opposite of Rapture theology. It is judgment theology.

Enter the king. The “he” may also be the king. The king is simply one of us. He no more knows the future than any of us do. Who can tell him how it will be? Daniel could. Daniel *did*. He told Belshazzar that he was going to die that evening as an act of God’s judgment for his own wickedness. “You have been weighed in the balances and found wanting” (Dan 5:27). Belshazzar knew it was true and die he did. The writing was literally on the wall. But what about today? Who do the despots have today to speak God’s future plans to them? Would they even listen?

“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” (Ecc 8:8). Not even the king has the power over the day of his death. Only God does, in his appointed time. The false prophets he surrounds himself with, who tell him lies about what is coming, won’t stop what is coming. He has waged war on God. And if God is at war with him, he can’t extricate himself from that battle. He can’t make it go away with wicked behavior. What goes around comes around. Those tyrants given over to wickedness will not deliver themselves through it. God

will have his day. God is the Judge of all. All will stand before him and give account. This is much firmer grounding for knowing how to live than speculation.

The *final verse* summarizes it all. “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” (Ecc 8:9). And so we see that indeed, he is contemplating the actions of evil kings. But he is also contemplating the actions of the Good King. God has a day of judgment that no man will escape.

All this is *not to say* that that when we live in unprecedented times, our minds should not think of the Second Coming of Christ. We are given that doctrine as a comfort. We are even given signs that we can ponder and wonder about, if they will or are coming true in our own day. But *to obsess* over timing and to look at all the things happening around you in order to escape the reality or to ground yourself in something that you do not have certainty about, *it is not from wisdom that you do this*. There is something more certain in the future, something more solid to ground your feet upon. God will judge the living and the dead. No tyrant or despot will escape it.

This is *also not to say* that you must always obey the tyrant. We’ve seen that the Preacher is not saying such a thing. In fact, he actually makes very interesting loopholes in this

very passage. He says think carefully about what you do. Do not enter hastily into dangerous waters. Count the cost—to you *and to others*. And as you do, think more often about God's judgment than your own.

Do you believe that God has forgotten? Does the Omniscient not have eyes to see? Does the Almighty not have hands to do? You don't think he knows exactly what men are doing today? He knows a lot more than you do. And all that he knows, is true.

Then consider the First Coming of the Messiah, The King of kings, the Word that we obey. Has not God judged your sins in Christ? Has he not shown you mercy and forgiveness? All other ground is sinking sand. Should not this First Coming also have a place in how you think about the despot? Pray for them that it may be well with you. But then remember, though God shows mercy now, those who will not bow their knee and who spend their lives troubling the children of Adam will be judged with a final, terrible judgment from which no man can escape. God knows what is happening. He has not forgotten. He knows our unprecedented times and has ordained all these days to be. In that, you can put your full confidence.

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