

Ecclesiastes 8:1-4

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-8/ecclesiastes-81-4/>

Since God is our ultimate authority, the wise man learns how to serve and submit to the authorities over him.

Solomon begins this section by asking a rhetorical question—*who is like the wise man, and who knows the interpretation of a matter?* The question stirs an interesting observation—one Solomon wrestles with throughout Ecclesiastes. He seems to be suggesting that we cannot master our compulsion to understand everything, but it is possible to *interpret* certain *matters*. This is what makes wisdom more desirable than foolishness. Although the wise cannot make sense of **all** things, *a man's wisdom illumines him and causes his stern face to beam.*

Why does the *wise man* have a *face* that is *stern*? Perhaps it is because we cannot understand everything in life—existence is vanity, a vapor ([Ecclesiastes 1:2](#)). What causes it to *beam* or illuminate? Perhaps it is when *wisdom* of the *wise man illumines him*. Although comprehensive understanding is not possible, we can still exercise the *interpretation of a matter*. In keeping with Solomon's insights so far, the starting point for this is faith. We can begin with what God tells us is true. Then we can observe what is around us, make an *interpretation*, and gain an understanding that brings us hope and joy.

The word for *interpretation* is “peshar” and this is its only occurrence in Scripture. It is closely related to the word “peshar”—which means interpretation of dreams—but is a little different. “Peshar” means interpreting circumstances. *Interpretation* allows one to appraise situations and act accordingly.

Solomon then begins a new thought, as indicated by the connector *I* say. Solomon gives us the following advice: *Keep the command of the king because of the oath before God. Do not be in a hurry to leave him. Do not join in an evil matter, for he will do whatever he pleases.*

This could be considered a self-serving statement, since Solomon is king. But it is more likely just a practical piece of advice. The king has the power to *do whatever he pleases*. So it is a good idea to *keep the command of the*

king, because the King has the power to punish those who oppose him. It might be that you don't really like what the king is doing. But Solomon advises patience, telling us not to *be in a hurry to leave him*.

Further, if you don't like the king, Solomon advises to stay away from a mutiny. He advises to *not join in an evil matter* such as overthrowing the king. A king has the power to *do whatever he pleases*, which tells you he is likely to punish insurrection. Since *the word of the king is authoritative*, if he decides to punish someone, there is no one to say, "*What are you doing?*"

Solomon is likely speaking from practical experience on this point. His brother Absalom deposed their father David ([2 Samuel 15-18](#)). Although David mourned the loss of his son, the episode ended with Absalom's death.

In addition to the practical advice, Solomon notes a moral obligation to obey the king. The people should *keep the command of the king because of the oath before God*. This raises the question of what *oath before God* Solomon is referring to. The Bible does not record any instance of Israel being asked to make an *oath before God* that relates to the people swearing loyalty to the king. This would run counter to God's insistence that He is the true king over Israel.

This phrase can also be translated *keep the command of the king because of the oath of God*. This translation is more likely, referring to an *oath* sworn by God.

What *oath* did God swear? The main *oath* God swore can be found in [Genesis 22:16](#), where God tells Abraham after he had believed God would resurrect his son Isaac:

"By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations will be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

It is God that has promised blessing to Israel. The rationale for deposing a king is always "This king is harming the nation, a new king will help the nation." But that would mean trusting in self rather than in the promise of God. So it seems likely Solomon is offering two reasons to *keep the command of*

the king: 1) it is practical and 2) it trusts God's oath, and God is the only true source of blessing.

These instructions are echoed to believers in the New Testament era in [Romans 13:1-4](#), which says:

“Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good.”

This passage has the same basic instruction, to obey the governing authorities. Why? Because they are appointed by God. Appointed to what end? As a minister for good. So obeying authority shows trust in God. There are exceptions. The Roman believers receiving this message were in violation of Roman law by following Christ. But Paul is telling them to follow all the laws they can follow.

Biblical Text:

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. 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?"