

**Wisdom and Folly**  
**Ecclesiastes 9:13–10:20**  
**November 20, 2022**

In the first sermon of this series I told you about Sidney Greidanus, one of our era’s most influential writers on both interpreting and preaching Christ from the Old Testament. I quoted the very first sentence of his book on Ecclesiastes, which reads as follows, “Ecclesiastes may be the most difficult biblical book to interpret and preach.”<sup>1</sup> Imagine my joy this week when I opened his chapter on *this* particular passage and read *this* edifying first sentence, “Of all the passages in Ecclesiastes, this one is probably the most difficult to interpret and preach.”<sup>2</sup>

All that reminded me of a sermon I once heard John Piper preach entitled: “Why God Inspired Hard Texts.”<sup>3</sup> Maybe you’ve wondered something like this before, right after reading Ezekiel 12 during your devotion. Why can’t every passage be immediately clear? Why does understanding the Bible sometimes take work? You’re not the only one to find some biblical texts difficult to interpret. In fact, Peter said in his second epistle that some things in Paul’s letters were hard to understand (2 Pet. 3:16).

In Piper’s sermon on this subject, he listed four reasons why God inspired these hard texts. The first reason is desperation. God wants us to approach the Scriptures—not as if we’ve mastered them, or as if they’re easily mastered—but as if we desperately need His aid to even comprehend them. The second reason follows from the first, that of supplication. Once we rightly sense our dependence upon God to understand what He’s revealed about Himself, *then* we beg Him to help us grasp the truth. The third reason is cogitation. Contrary to some folks’ instincts, thinking hard is not an alternative to asking God for help. It’s both/and. He gives understanding, but He does so often via the hard work of thinking. And, finally, the fourth reason is education. What’s he mean by that? Piper writes, “Education is cultivating the life of the mind so that it knows how to grow in true understanding. That impulse was unleashed by God’s inspiring a Book with complex demanding paragraphs in it.” Maybe you’ve said to yourself as we’ve walked through Ecclesiastes: “Why are you putting me through this?” Or “Why are you putting yourself through this?” I think Piper’s four reasons get us part of the way there.

Recently, I attended a lunch where a few pastors were talking about preaching this book. And two of them said, in essence, “You can’t preach the whole book. Do 6 or 7 topical sermons. Your people won’t be able to handle it.” I have *at least* two responses to that: 1. Is it possible you’re selling God’s people too short? 2. What gives you the right to decide? God inspired all texts on purpose, including the hard ones. And He intends to use all He inspired for our good. Paul wrote, **All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness** (2 Tim. 3:16). That includes Ecclesiastes 9 and 10. Note first,

**1. Wisdom is Better than Folly (9:13–10:2)**

One reason commentators think this passage is more challenging than others is because the connections between the various ideas are not immediately clear. I’m sure you sensed that when we read it. However, what is quite noticeable is that the Preacher is contrasting wisdom and folly. In our

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<sup>1</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes*, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Greidanus, 239.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/why-god-inspired-hard-texts>

verses, wisdom or the wise are mentioned eleven different times. Fool/foolly/foolishness is mentioned nine different times.<sup>4</sup> And in multiple instances, they are compared to one another.

In this first section, they're compared by means of a story. Verse 13: **Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me.** What did the Preacher see and become impressed by? Verse 14: **There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it and constructed large siegeworks against it.** The details might be sparse, but we can imagine the scene. A few men are in a small city. This isn't Fort Knox. This isn't Helm's Deep. This city isn't ancient Constantinople, whose Theodosian Walls no one breached for a thousand years. It's a small city with a few men in it. And it's been surrounded by a great king and his army. With ample power and resources, they've constructed siegeworks, platforms or towers built around and above the city walls.<sup>5</sup> From that angle, their arrows take aim. This scene is akin to a thousand Green Berets facing off the middle school ROTC. The small city doesn't stand a chance.<sup>6</sup> There's no way out. Like the bird in a snare or a fish in a net from last week's text, the city itself is caught.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, verse 15: **But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom.** This is borderline Hollywood screenplay stuff. The unexpected character, the one that has a chip on his shoulder because he's been overlooked, rises like a Phoenix when everyone's back is against the wall. We eat it up, don't we? But is the Preacher shining the spotlight on the character himself? No, it's what the character used to deliver the city. Against the great king was a poor *wise* man. And *how* did he deliver? Verse 15: **by his wisdom.** What does verse 16 say? **So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength."** That's not the only time wisdom is called better. Verse 17: **The words of the wise heard in quietness are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.** What does verse 18 say? **Wisdom is better than weapons of war.**

Throughout Ecclesiastes the Preacher's made clear the limitations of wisdom. We can't always figure out what to do. Nor can we always figure out what happened. Under the sun, wisdom is limited in that way. But, as a needed reminder, he's not saying wisdom isn't better than folly.

I wonder if we actually believe wisdom is better than folly. To be more clear, do we actually believe what God says over what we want to do? This can be complicated because folly is bound up in our heart. Apart from grace, we want to do what we want to do. To complicate it further, wisdom doesn't always work. So, if our heart says to do this other thing—even if it's folly—if we think it might work, does it matter what God says about it? Wouldn't the end justify the means?

Wisdom may be limited under the sun, but that doesn't mean folly is better. Nor are our choices between them neutral. We can't say, "Thank goodness God doesn't care about *this* aspect of my life. Thank goodness following Christ doesn't apply here." Wisdom and folly aren't the same. In fact, the Preacher emphasizes how vastly different wisdom and folly are in verses 2 and 3 of chapter 10: **A wise man's heart directs him toward the right, but the foolish man's heart directs him toward the left.** I know this probably feels a bit like Captain Obvious, but we dare not conflate wisdom and folly.

Wisdom is not only different, it's better. Back in chapter 7 the Preacher said, **Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city (7:19).** And that's what he illustrated with this story in chapter 9. The great king surrounds the small city. But the poor wise man *by his wisdom* delivers it. In the midst of snares and nets, wisdom can come to our aid.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Greidanus, 242.

<sup>5</sup> Holman Bible Dictionary

<sup>6</sup> Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 234.

<sup>7</sup> Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*, 192.

<sup>8</sup> Provan, 192.

## 2. The Uncertain Outcomes of Wisdom Under the Sun (10:4–11; 9:15b; 16b; 18b; 10:1)

But you say, “Hey Matt, didn’t you miss some key plot points in that story about the poor wise man?” Absolutely. In fact, this story probably wouldn’t get past the writing room for network television. Because this isn’t an unqualified triumph for the upstart hero. It’s far from rags to riches. The last half of verses 15, 16, and 18 sober the seemingly victorious. Verse 15: **But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man.** We’ve seen this, maybe experienced this. Once the danger passes, everyone we aided suddenly suffers from amnesia. The co-worker doesn’t remember that you took their shift. The boss doesn’t remember your decade-long loyalty. The son or daughter forgets how many sleepless nights you had raising him or her, burying deep within their psyche the sacrifices you made for their good. That friend they just met, who’s done nothing for them, gets all their time and energy.

Under the sun this is often the unfortunate reality. However, that doesn’t mean it was wrong to serve others. We don’t do it for the return. We do it because it’s right. It’s interesting that *immediately* after the Preacher laments no one remembering the wise man, he pens, v. 16: **So, I said, “Wisdom is better than strength.”** That’s his conclusion from the fact that everyone forgot. It’s still better. Regardless of the outcome, that remains true. As he’s done before, the Preacher unapologetically slams *seeming* contradictions together. In fact, he’s not finished doing so, sandwiching<sup>9</sup> that “better” truth with the “on the other hand,” of verse 16. It’s better, **but . . . the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded.** And, in case *now* you’re tempted to think wisdom *isn’t* better, verse 17 comes with the “on the other hand” bit again: **The words of the wise heard in quietness are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.**

In my mind, some of the reason commentators struggle with unifying these verses is because of the nature of the truths themselves. Whether or not we think they’re contradictory, God says that under the sun *both* are true. He never said our wisdom would be perfect, nor that our application of wisdom would be flawlessly executed. He’s just said that wisdom is *better* than folly. I do wonder whether we sometimes fail to understand particular passages because we just don’t like what the Bible says. We’d prefer things be tidy. But that’s just *not* the nature of our existence under the sun in this fallen world. Journalist H. L. Mencken once wrote this, “There is always a well-known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.”<sup>10</sup>

Why is wisdom limited? We’ve said it. He’s said it. But he says it again at the end of verse 18: **Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.** In other words, it takes a lot less effort to tear something down than it takes to build it. Or as Derek Kidner writes, it’s “easier to make a stink than to create sweetness.”<sup>11</sup> Speaking of stench, look at verse 1 of chapter 10: **Dead flies make a perfumer’s oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor.** The perfumer’s oil was nice, you thought. But, then you saw the dead flies. Which stands out to you? The oil or the flies? The same truth was back in verse 17. The ruler shouts. Yet, the wise man is heard in quietness. Which one is noticed? Who’s heard by more people?

It’s the one that shouts. There are a thousand ways we see this play out in our day. Among the foolish, folly is weightier than wisdom. Are the bestseller lists dotted with better words? Is the music/food that’s consumed most actually better? More practically, is the way to handle conflict

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<sup>9</sup> Strong participle.

<sup>10</sup> Fred Shapiro, *The Yale Book of Quotations*, 511. Ironically, Mencken is often *wrongly* quoted as having said something a bit simpler, “For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.”

<sup>11</sup> Derek Kidner, *Ecclesiastes*, BST, 88.

done in wisdom more often than not? Or do we ignore one another, yell at one another, or gossip about one another. Under the sun folly often—not always, but *often*—outweighs wisdom: **a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor.**

This manifests itself in rank and titles as well. That’s what verses 5–7 describe: **There is an evil I have seen under the sun, like an error which goes forth from the ruler—folly is set in many exalted places while rich men sit in humble places. I have seen slaves riding on horses and princes walking like slaves in the land.** The labels of this metaphor might initially confuse, but it seems that, in this case, “rich” is the opposite of folly.<sup>12</sup> The “slaves” and “princes” labels are being used metaphorically too. The point of the imagery is to say that, in a fallen world, just like the wrong book is the bestseller and the wrong song wins the Grammy, the wrong people are often elevated. Conversely, those that might have more experience, more wisdom, end up walking like servants to their humble places. It’s worth being reminded: the Bible hasn’t assured us of anything different than that. Again, do we find this confusing because we don’t like what it says?

To put it in the modern day, living wisely does not mean you’ll necessarily get the promotion. I remember working a job in college and the guys that showed up late and were lazy were put on the more enjoyable jobs. Conversely, the guys that showed up on time and worked hard ended up being put on the more difficult jobs. College Matt thought, “There ought to be a reward for doing what’s right.” Uh huh . . . Sure thing, buddy. By the way, if you’re in a spot like that, verse 4 and verse 20 of our text give good wisdom, emphasizing both calmness and self-control.<sup>13</sup>

One sinner destroys much good (9:18). Unfortunately, there’s worse news: there’s more than one sinner! So, there’s always risk, even vulnerability in doing what’s wise. That’s what verses 9–11 seem to picture: **He who digs a pit may fall into it, and a serpent may bite him who breaks through a wall. He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, and he who splits logs may be endangered by them.** Under the sun, the wrong people can be elevated. And under the sun, those that do what’s wise, in one sense, have to stick their neck out. Everyone else is standing back. You, in wisdom, act, breaking through the wall. When you do, the snake bites. Verse 11 says that the skill of a snake charmer is good for a show, but when you break through a wall and a snake is waiting on the other side, there’s just no time to apply that skill.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the circus isn’t the real world. Verse 10 contends that **wisdom has the advantage of giving success**, but that might make the wise more vulnerable. He that splits logs may be endangered by them.

How do you sum all this up? Wisdom is indeed better than folly. But fools forget the wise. Under the sun, fools exalt those that lack wisdom. And under the sun, wisdom still has risks. Creation groans. All is vanity. Does that mean we shouldn’t do what’s wise? Absolutely not.

Maybe you say, “Matt, commentators have been confounded by this mixture of metaphors for centuries, but you sound like there’s no mystery to you at all. You figured it out!” Don’t be deceived. This is a hard passage. I’ve looked at it as closely as I know how. I’ve read many of the important voices. But, if I’m honest, I could probably use another month.<sup>15</sup>

Wisdom’s uncertain outcomes can be a complicated subject. This third section on the certain outcomes of folly is clearer, in my mind.

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<sup>12</sup> Zach Eswine, *Recovering Eden*, 197.

<sup>13</sup> Greidanus, 240.

<sup>14</sup> Longman, 246.

<sup>15</sup> Maybe I’ll send out a poll to see if you want to hear another sermon on this text in January.

### 3. The Certain Outcomes of Folly (10:12–19; 10:3)

In the wisdom literature, words matter. They're not neutral. Jesus declared that they point to something within (Matt. 12:34). Further, in wisdom literature words have consequences. Verse 12: **Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious, while the lips of a fool consume him; the beginning of his talking is folly and the end of it is wicked madness.** What are these consequences? The lips of a fool consume him. He keeps saying things that are untrue; he keeps gossiping about others; he keeps tearing others down; and little by little he's destroyed. God made us; He knows how we work best. And He says that foolish talk leads to madness. So, what's the application? Watch your words. They're not harmless. They might do more than destroy someone else. They might harm you.

So, surely everyone will just be circumspect, quick to listen and slow to speak, right? Verse 14: **Yet the fool multiplies words.** Where words are many, sin is not absent. Verse 14 goes on, **No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him?** I found one particular commentator helpful on this, who wrote, "The number of his words is in inverse proportion to the extent of his understanding."<sup>16</sup>

Verse 13 asserted that the end of folly was wicked madness. What's this look like practically? Verse 15: **The toil of a fool so wearies him that he does not even know how to go to a city.** The fool's forgotten something simple like how to get to town. It's interesting to compare this verse to verse 3: **Even when the fool walks along the road, his sense is lacking and he demonstrates to everyone that he is a fool.** He or she's not only lost, it's clear to others that they are. Again, folly affects us. Thinking upon folly affects us. The doing of folly has effects on our mental state. In case you've minimized this in one way or another, be reminded: sin devastates and destroys. John Owen warned, "Be killing sin or it will be killing you."<sup>17</sup>

These are certain outcomes of folly. Our passage started with a story and it ends with one. The final verses illustrate these certain outcomes. Verse 16: **Woe to you, O land, whose king is a lad and whose princes feast in the morning. Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time—for strength and not for drunkenness.** Once again, the Preacher contrasts wisdom and folly. To be clear, last week's text on eating and drinking with gladness did *not* condone gluttony or drunkenness. That much is clear in these verses. And that particular brand of folly has consequences, or certain outcomes. Verse 18: **Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks.** In the Preacher's mind, instead of doing what they're supposed to do, the fool gives themselves to indolence and slackness, directly contradicting the wisdom of 9:10: **Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.** And verse 19 is the worldview of the one that begins the day ignoring his or her work, grabbing a glass instead: **Men prepare a meal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything.** The Preacher isn't saying that last part is true. He's saying that's what some rulers live like: they don't feast at the appropriate time; they eat and drink for the purpose of drunkenness; they don't live in wisdom. For them, these are certain outcomes: the rafters sag and the house leaks.

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<sup>16</sup> Provan, 196.

<sup>17</sup> John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*.

## Conclusion

That's the passage. Yes, it's a hard one to interpret. Some of this is because the metaphors themselves are difficult to nail down. Other times it might be because what we read is *not* something we necessarily want to accept. In both cases, as John Piper said, texts like this cause us to think more deeply, to realize our dependence upon Him more acutely, and to ask for His help in understanding more fervently. Hard texts can actually expose those that aren't serious about knowing God.<sup>18</sup>

Wisdom requires the same posture. It's not something you download with step-by-step instructions for life, as in, "Say this sentence here. Take this posture here. Pursue this opportunity there." It's not that simple. Wisdom requires that we think deeply, realize our dependence upon Him more acutely, and ask for His help in understanding more fervently. In fact, slogging through passage after passage—digging deeply in the challenging ones—and letting those hard truths reorient us, is one of the paths to wisdom.

So, will we keep coming to Him? Even to hear His hard truths? And will we believe whatever He says, and live as if it's true? That's what Jesus said was wise. At the close of His mountain sermon, He contrasted wisdom and folly, **Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell—and great was its fall** (Matt. 7:24–27).

Jesus said hard things too. Some of the things He said were hard to understand (ex: parables). Other things He said we might find a hard time believing. Did He truly come for me? Is He actually the resurrection and the life? Can His joy be mine if I believe?

Might we think upon Him and His words more deeply, realize our dependence upon Him more acutely, and ask for His help in understanding more fervently.

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<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Chris Wilbanks for making this astute observation.