



# Ecclesiastes: *The Vanity of Life Under the Sun*

Ecclesiastes 9:11-10:20

## Introduction

As we continue our series through the book of Ecclesiastes, we come now to a section that is decidedly less organized than other sections of Ecclesiastes. So much so in fact that Martin Luther noted about this section of Ecclesiastes, "Solomon really makes some harsh transitions."<sup>1</sup> So here's how we're going to approach this section of text. First, we need to see that the overarching theme that connects this section, loosely albeit, is *Wisdom vs Folly*. And we are going to move kind of helter-skelter like through our text to see the following points...

1. Wisdom is awesome, but it doesn't *always* work for us
2. The folly of fools and a word to the wise
3. Folly in the high places
4. Folly everywhere else
5. The words of the wise and the babble of fools
6. The wise and foolish king

## Wisdom is awesome, but it doesn't *always* work for us (9:11-10:1)

Why? Because at times, life can be so darn unpredictable says...

### ❖ **Ecclesiastes 9:11-12**

And this reality is illustrated by the following story...

### ❖ **Ecclesiastes 9:13-16**

Three things to see here in this story. First, *wisdom came from the most unlikely of all places didn't it?* It wasn't the majestic king or the mighty general who got the two out of trouble was it? It was just a simple poor man. And beloved this often is the case. Wisdom that saves the day often comes from the places we least expect it doesn't it?

The second thing I want us to see is that *wisdom over came seemingly insurmountable odds*. A Big mighty kingdom with near infinite military might was overturned by the small, insignificant town. How? Wisdom. And this is why the preacher says in verse 17 that "Wisdom is better than weapons of war."

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, "Notes on Ecclesiastes." Quoted from Sean O'Donnel, *Ecclesiastes: Reformed Expository Commentary*, p.183.



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The third thing I want us to see here is that despite the fact that wisdom was found in unlikely man and despite the fact that wisdom delivered them from a foe that they could not deliver themselves from, the poor man's wisdom is despised and not heard.

And in this I cannot help but think of our Lords Jesus. You see, he was no mighty warrior. He was not the kind of king that people had come to expect. He was merely the humble son of a Carpenter, from a humble town.

❖ Isaiah 53:2—*he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him*

He was just like this poor man from a small insignificant town wasn't he? And Jesus, the very wisdom of God, according to...

❖ 1 Corinthians 1:24—*Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God*

Saved his people even more gloriously than this poor wise man did. And the reaction was the same wasn't it? Just as the town rejected the poor wiseman, so too the Lord Jesus...

❖ John 1:11—*came to his own, and his own people did not receive him*

Beloved, let's not miss this little hint of our savior clever concealed here in the pages of the OT.

Solomon continues by telling us that not only is wisdom often ignored, but it can also be quite vulnerable at times...

### ❖ **Ecclesiastes 9:17-10:1**

You see, while quite sound wisdom is great and more powerful than weapons of war, it only takes one sinner to ruin everything. And this is why I think the NT speaks so forcefully against false teachers. It's not that the authors of the NT are mean, angry, judgmental people. It's that they understand this very principle.

In the OT false prophets were stoned because even one false prophet can lead a whole generation of people into sin and rebellion. In 2 Timothy Paul speaking of false teachers says...

❖ 2 Timothy 3:5-6—*having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions*

Again, Paul isn't being mean, he isn't being judgmental, he's simply aware that one false teacher among a flock can lead many into sin and he's not going to let that happen to God's people. Beloved, rest assured, we your elders won't let that happen to God's people here at RCF either.

From here, Solomon moves on to discuss...

## The folly of fools and a word to the wise (10:2-4)

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### ❖ **Ecclesiastes 10:2-3**

Here Solomon contrasts the fool and the wise man. And he does so on a couple of levels. First he shows us that a *fool is a fool by nature*. You see, a righteous man isn't righteous because he works hard enough to earn righteousness for himself, a man is righteous by the grace of God alone! In the book of Ezekiel, God teaches us that he makes us righteous by taking out our hard, foolish, wicked heart and putting a new heart and a new spirit within us. He says...

❖ Ezekiel 36:27—*I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*

This is what Solomon speaks of when he says, "wise man's heart inclines him to the right." By contrast, the person who has never experienced what is spoken of in Ezekiel 36, his heart remains as it is...foolish, stubborn, rebellious, and wicked according to passages like Romans 3, Romans 8:7-8, and many many others. So what we end up with in all this is something very similar to what Jesus himself said in...

❖ Luke 6:45—*The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks*

Second, he shows us that a *fool acts like a fool*. You see, you will know a Christian by the fruit of their life won't you? A Christian is someone who is marked by...

❖ Galatians 5:22—*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*

While the wicked/foolish man is marked by a very different set of characteristics. Solomon here say that he "lacks sense." And the marks of the foolish man become quite clear to the people around him says Solomon. With every word he says and every action he takes, he shows the people around him what kind of person he is.

Well beloved, we too ought to be showing the world what kind of people we are aren't we? Isn't that just what Jesus said in...

❖ John 13:35—*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*

Isn't that what the Apostle John said in...

❖ 1 John 2:5-6—*Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked*

Now, having made this contrast, Solomon goes on to give a word to the wise. Solomon helps us avoid the fools folly before the king by saying...

### ❖ **Ecclesiastes 10:4**



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So Solomon is basically saying, "Don't be a fool! If the king gets mad at you, don't spaz out like a fool! Keep calm and explain the situation and more often than not, all will be forgiven and forgotten."

Now, the astute sermon listener will likely notice that this piece of wisdom seems to be harkening back to the first part of chapter 8. In fact, it almost seems as if Solomon is saying, "Remember how in chapter 8 I told you that the wise man knows the right way to appeal to the king? Remember how I never actually told you exactly what that way is? Well...here you go...better late than never eh?"

From here, the preacher moves on to observe...

### Folly in the high places (10:5-7)

Similar to chapter 9:11-12, Solomon again notes that life often dishes out just the opposite of what you would expect. Conventional wisdom would say that the highest positions in life will be filled by the most capable. Yet Solomon observes the following...

#### ❖ **Ecclesiastes 10:5-7**

Do you hear what he is saying here? He's saying, "Man this just ain't right!!! The king (which is Solomon himself btw) has given all the most important jobs in this world to a bunch of knuckleheads who don't know what their doing and the one's who are best suited for these jobs are stuck in lowlier positions.

So what then in the wisdom that Solomon desires to impart to us in this section? How is Solomon exhorting us to live here under the sun? I think it is this, If you happen to lead an organization, or even a part of an organization, don't dole out positions and promotions because people are your friends, or because people have done you a favor in the past. Put the right man in the right job. If you don't you'll be surrounded by people who are incompetent to the downfall of everyone involved.

And this is something that most of us have experience with don't we? Haven't most of us seen a situation where an organizations most gifted leader is stuck in a low position while the top dog is a buffoon who attained his position because someone one, somewhere along the way, owed him or his family a favor? Even in our own nations 'high places' we see this don't we? If you want to hold one of our nations highest offices, you need not be qualified per se as long as you're last name is Roosevelt, Kennedy, Clinton, or Bush right? Far too often its not what you know and what you can do, but who you know and who's you're Daddy that gets you promoted. And of this Solomon says, "It is utter folly!"

From here he goes on to point outfit folly is found in more places than just the 'high places.' There is...

### Folly, folly everywhere!!! (10:8-11)

You see life just never seems to go as we hope it does according to...



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### ❖ **Ecclesiastes 10:8-11**

Work you hands to the bone digging a pit and what happens all too often? You fall in and break your neck! If your in prison and you spend 10 years digging your way through the walls using nothing but spoons, what happens all to often as soon as you reach the other side? You'll get bit by a snake die, or shot by a guard waiting for you on the other side and there your labor and life ends. Tragic and horrible folly! Folly that seems to be down right unavoidable. Verse 11 speaks of how a snake charmer can often meet his fate because he was bitten before he had a chance to use his abilities.

But this passage points out that not all folly is unavoidable. Solomon says that the lumberjack who goes to work with a dull blade is no victim of chance, but makes things harder on himself. And had he exercised wisdom and sharpened his blade, his labor would have been significantly easier.

So what's the wisdom that Solomon seeks to impart to us in this section? It is this, some times disaster is unavoidable and there's really nothing you can do about it, other times it is totally avoidable if only we would seek *WISDOM!*

Sometimes, the shipyard is cutting back, you get laid off, and there's not a thing you can do about it right? Other times, the shipyard is cutting back and you're laid off because of your own folly right? You knew that you should have worked harder, been more reliable, taken fewer goof off days...I mean...sick days but you didn't and now the consequences of those decisions are upon you. Doesn't every student know that when the professor assigns a big paper, the wise thing is to get started right away and chip away at it little by little until it's done? Of course we do! But what happens all too often instead, we put it off until the last minute and bring tremendous amounts of stress upon ourselves don't we? "This is folly," says Solomon. Totally avoidable folly.

And this point has a spiritual application too. You see there are times in which the bad stuff that happens to us is just for God to show his glory to the world. We saw this in John 9 didn't we? The disciples asked Jesus, "Why was this man born blind? Did he sin or his parents?" To which Jesus replied...

❖ John 9:3—*It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him*

Yet other times, the rotten things that happen to us might very well be God's rebuke or judgment upon us. In first Peter, we see that a man who fails to live well with his wife might find his prayers hindered...

❖ 1 Peter 3:7—*Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered*

And then in Acts 5, God brings devastating consequences upon Annanias and Sapphira for failing to honor their vow and lying to the Holy Spirit...

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- ❖ Acts 5:4-5—*Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.*” When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it

So heed this wisdom beloved, sometimes, bad things happen to through no fault of your own. But sometimes, God is bringing judgment upon you or fierce rebuke upon you for your sin. And you would be wise to live righteously before God, by the power of Holy Spirit within you to avoid any such rebuke or judgment.

From here, Solomon moves on to discuss...

### The words of the wise and the babble of fools (10:12-15)

#### ❖ **Ecclesiastes 10:12-15**

Here we see a stark contrast don't we? While the wise man's words win him favor, the fools words destroy him. He starts off talking nonsense, his nonsense spirals out of control into utter nonsense, and he starts making all sorts of nonsense predictions about the future. And thus he becomes a man to be pitied really. For while he makes all sorts of predictions about what will soon take place, verse 15 shows us that he likely doesn't even know the way home much less the future.

And so the application of this is beware people who always think they have the winning lottery number yet can't pay their own bills. They likely don't have wisdom to offer you. Beware the people who say foolish things like, "Obama is the anti-Christ and Obamacare is the mark of the beast!" Beware beloved people like Harold Camping who try to tell you that they know when Jesus is coming because Jesus himself said...

- ❖ Matthew 24:36—*But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only*

Heed not the fools wisdom beloved.

And finally, in our text, Solomon speaks of...

### The wise and foolish king (10:16-20)

#### ❖ **Ecclesiastes 10:16-20**

Here Solomon compares two kinds of rulers. The wise and the foolish king. The wise king reigns in such a way that prosperity flourishes and joy abounds throughout the land. Yet, the foolish kings acts likes a child. He doesn't think about what's good for the people, he only thinks about what's good for himself. So he throws parties for himself even at the expense of the welfare of his people. He doesn't want to burden himself or his wallet with maintenance so he foolishly lets his kingdom fall into ruin and disrepair.



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Life isn't so pleasant during the reign of such a king, yet Solomon warns us not to be too quick to speak ill of him. In fact, he says, don't even think nasty thoughts about him because a little birdie will end up telling him and it'll be a bad day for you.

And this little nugget of wisdom has both a secular or practical application as well as a spiritual application. Practically speaking, I can't help thinking that this passage has much wisdom to offer to those of us with Facebook and Twitter accounts. You see, though you are posting to your own "private" Facebook and Twitter, let me assure you, it's NOT private! It's out there for the whole world to see and so you would be wise not to post things that you don't want a little birdie telling anyone.

And spiritually speaking, this piece of wisdom from Solomon sounds an awful lot like what Jesus said in Luke 12:2-3 when he said...

❖ Luke 12:2-3—*Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.*

So here Jesus brings this point of Solomon to the next level. You see, Solomon teaches us to be careful with what we say because people here under the sun will eventually find out. And Jesus goes further by saying, "Your words and deeds will not only *become known by man*, but they are *already known by Almighty God*." So beloved, be all the more careful how you live because we live constantly in plain sight of our God. May we not live in such a way that brings shame to the name of our God, but may we live in such a way that he is glorified. Beloved one of my most fervent prayers for us is one that Paul prayed in...

❖ Philippians 2:15—*that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,*

So that's the wisdom that Solomon has for us in this section of Ecclesiastes. May we strive to apply this wisdom while we live here under the sun, for the glory of Christ. Let's pray.