

Wisdom and Folly
Ecclesiastes 9.11-10.20

These are interesting days... someone said, “In an unsettling reversal of my teenage years, I am now yelling at our parents for going out!”

- **That’s very Ecclesiastes... Proverbs deals more in generalities; Eccl with exceptions.**
- **It deals with frustrations, complexity; disappointment - life under the sun.**
- **I’ve had pastors email me this week asking for our breakdown of the book!**
- **It’s a great book to be studying at any point in life, but I have been struck by its relevance for our particular moment.**

In this moment, we are aware of the unpredictability of life.

- **If there’s a word that captures this moment in history for me – it is the word “unpredictability” or “uncertainty.”**
 - **One frustration has been the inability to plan.**
 - **For a planner, this has been hard.**
 - **How many of you have thrown all your plans in the trash?**
 - **Nearly every event in the Spring has been canceled.**
 - **Don’t plan on travel for a while...**
 - **The gym is closed.**
 - **Different sermon series.**
 - **Groups, activities, canceled.**
 - **As soon as you make plans, you get a notification that the guidelines have changed.**
 - **For some of you, you are dealing with uncertainty of your job.**
 - **Some of you may have already lost your job.**
- **What will happen next? We can’t predict with certainty.**
- **“Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.” (Prov 19.21)**
- **“Time and chance happen to them all... man does not know his time” (Eccl 9.11-12)**
- **“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Prov 3)**
 - **“Do you trust me?”**

We are not only aware of uncertainty, but we also aware of tragedy of death during these times.

- **We watch these numbers rise and rise. And we mourn.**
- **We are concerned for the **elderly** and the **vulnerable**.**
- **In Italy, it is a catastrophe.**
- **Ecclesiastes forces us to think about death and to live our lives in view of the inevitability of death.**

We are aware of the need for wisdom during these times.

- **Parents need wisdom.**
- **Bosses need wisdom.**
- **Leaders need wisdom.**

- The country needs wisdom.
- The world needs wisdom.

Uncertainty. Death. Wisdom.

- This is not your favorite news channel.
- This is Ecclesiastes 9.11-10.20.
- **Written over 3,000 years ago, but extremely relevant; indeed eternally relevant.**
- **One would think that we picked this book knowing we'd be facing a pandemic, but I'm not that smart.**
 - **I might get lucky and predict the national championship, but I never saw this coming!**

And all that we have studied has helped us (I hope) to endure these days with peace of mind, self-control, wisdom, confident trust in the Lord's sovereignty, and gratitude for the Lord's goodness.

There are three points that I want you to see:

1. Life is unpredictable (9.11)
2. Death is inevitable. (9.12)
3. Wisdom is valuable (9.13-10.20)

#1: Life Is Unpredictable (9:11)

"You never know!" – Have you ever said that?

It captures verse 11: "Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all."

We have already seen that sometimes bad things happen to the righteous; and sometimes the wicked prosper.

Now, the Teacher says your abilities are no guarantee of success!

- **Ask any team that has ever upset a superior team!**
- **Usually, this time of year we are talking about the "Cinderella teams" now they're playing replays.**

The Teacher is saying that while it is usually true that those with greater abilities win, it's not always true.

- **The fastest runners usually win the races, but not always.**
 - **Think of the tortoise and the hare.**
- **The strongest soldiers usually win the battle, but not always.**
 - **Think of David and Goliath; Gideon and the Midianites.**
 - **Rocky and Clubber Lang.**
 - **Some times the guy who has been training like an animal in the gym gets knocked out at the bar by an old truck driver, who lands a good sucker punch.**

- **The brightest and most skillful people usually get the better jobs and make a lot of money but not always.**
 - **Reality TV starts!**
 - **Sometimes the job goes to the less qualified person because the boss is showing favoritism.**

In summary, human ability is no guarantee of success.

He adds, **“time and chance happen to them all”**

- Now, we don’t believe in the pagan notion of “chance.”
- We believe in the sovereignty of God (cf., Eph 1:11).
 - Everything we are going through today is under his sovereign rule.
 - We can trust our God.
- The Teacher is not denying God’s sovereignty; he is simply viewing life under the sun.
- It often *looks like* “chance” or “luck.” (cf, **Ruth 2:3**)
- Why? **Because we don’t always know what God is doing.**
- You may be really smart and gifted and struggle for a season financially.
- You may not be that smart or gifted and make a lot of money somehow.
- **You might have just been in the right place at the right time or born into the right family.**
- Sometimes the best army doesn’t win.
- **Sometimes Evansville beats Kentucky, Lehigh beats Duke, UMBC beats Virginia.**

Life is unpredictable.

- There is a time for everything under heaven. (**3:1**)
- The Lord will make everything beautiful in its time. (**3:11**)
- So we rest in the fact that we are “in God’s hand” (**9:1**)

We walk by faith according to God’s word, enjoying the moments of life that we have, living in reverence before him, and with confident trust in him.

#2: Death Is Inevitable (9:12)

We are back with the subject of death in verse 12.

- It is inevitable.
- The day of our death is unpredictable.

“For man does not know his time.” (9.12)

He illustrates the unpredictability of the day of our death and the inevitability of death with two images from nature (**of fish and birds**): “Like **fish** that are taken in an evil net, and like **birds** that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them” (**12b**).

Both of them get caught before they can get away.

- **If the fish would have been told, “Don’t do it, pal. There’s a hook in that worm” then he might have been able to avoid it. “Hey bird, don’t fly into that trap!”**

The same is true for us.

- The events of life will eventually overtake us.
- Death will come for us (this “evil” effect of the Fall), and we won’t be able to escape.
- We don’t know when that time will be.
- After death, comes the judgment.
- So the question is, “Are you ready to die?”

For the Christian, we don’t have to fear death because Jesus has conquered it.

Jesus says to his church:

“Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev 1.17-19)

- Jesus is alive; and those who are in him will live forever, and because of this glorious reality life is not vanity of vanities.

If you are not a Christian, then how do you plan to beat death?

- “I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (John 8.24).
- Do you recognize that God is merciful to you in giving you more days in this life so that you can turn to Christ and be saved?
- Do you see the uncertainty of life and the inevitability of death?
- If so, then be wise and believe on the One who alone can give eternal life.
- Believe on the One who forgives sins and heals diseases, and grants the fullness of life forevermore.

#3: Wisdom Is Valuable (9:13-10.20)

The following verses speak to the contrast between “folly” and “wisdom.”

- How should we live in view of the uncertainty of life and certainty of death? **Wisely.**
- Folly is mentioned at least **9** times in the chapter.
- He doesn’t say, “**just throw up your hands in despair!**” He says be wise.

These verses are a bit hard to arrange, but we can study them under these 6 **subjects**:

1. **Wisdom Is Powerful and Effective (9:13-18)**
2. **Wisdom Is Ruined by a Little Folly (10:1-3)**
3. **Wisdom is Needed in Leadership (10:4-7)**
4. **Wisdom Is Needed in Practical Situations (10:8-11)**
5. **Wisdom Is Needed in Our Speech (10:12-15)**
6. **Wisdom Is Needed in All of Life (10:16-20)**

1. Wisdom is Powerful and Effective (9:13-18)

He makes this point by giving an example and then by showing how it’s better than the less advantageous alternatives.

A. Wisdom Can Bring Remarkable Victory (13-15)

- **Here’s a picture of someone wise dealing with a crisis.**

- It's of a little man and a little city who teach us a big lesson (13).
- A great king comes up against a little city (14)
- This little man delivered the city! (15)
 - How? We aren't told.
 - Some examples come to mind like how Hezekiah saved Jerusalem through prayer. (2 Kings 19)
 - Disaster and death were about to come upon the people, but God responded to his plea and put the Assyrians to death instead.
- Sometimes one wise person can save an entire city.
- We aren't told how this man saved the city because "no one remembered" him! (9.15)
- This is another fact of life.
 - The wise are not always remembered.
- Yet, his wisdom saved the people.
 - Exodus: The Butler forgot Joseph when Joseph helped him get out of prison (Gen 40)
 - This shows us that your wisdom may not make you famous or praised – but it is still to be pursued.
- Can you name the inventors of such things you use everyday?
- With no baseball on TV, I am making my wife watch the Ken Burns baseball documentary with me – she needs to know who Sachael Paige was, and Honus Wagner, Alexander Carwright.
 - Most of these legends have been forgotten.
- The same is true for the world medicine, military, and travel.
- The wise are forgotten. But we still pursue wisdom.

B. Wisdom Is Better than Various Alternatives (16-18)

Here is another run of "better than statements.

"Wisdom is better than might" (v. 16)

- It's not always recognized though, "even though the poor man's wisdom is despised..."
- The previous example showed that people listened to the wise man, but that doesn't always happen... sometimes they "despise wisdom" (16b).
- Nevertheless wisdom is better than might.

The Wise Listen to the Wise (READ 17-18)

V. 17: Listen to the Quite Wise Person, not the Loudmouth Leader

- He shouts and feeds the flesh of foolish people.
 - Khrushchev's shoe-banging incident in 1960! Slamming it down in protest! (Some of you may be tempted to go all Khrushcev on your kids during this home alone time).
- **The loudest voice is not always the wisest voice.**
- Often churches are divided because the loud complainers destroy unity by trying to control meetings throwing their weight around.
- Proud and angry husbands destroy marriages.
- Government leaders can destroy countries.

- The wise are often the quite voices.
- It's not the loud word that always moves people, but the wise word.
- Perhaps you've been in a meeting before where maybe one or two people are just like bulls in a china shop talking loudly and incessantly, and then eventually, some quiet chap speaks and everyone is like, "say that again. I need to write it down. Brilliant. I think that's my next tattoo."
- You don't have to be a loud-mouth to be a good leader; to be good coach; to be a good preacher.

V. 18: He's not denying that there's a time for war, nor is he denying the usefulness of weapons, but he is saying that wisdom is better than weapons.

- He's saying that one sinful individual can ruin wisdom, which leads into the next section.
- It doesn't take much for folly to ruin wisdom.
- A foolish council member, team member can do a lot of damage.

So wisdom is powerful and effective, pursue wisdom and listen to the wise...

2. Wisdom is Ruined by a Little Folly (10:1-3)

V. 1: Wisdom is sweet like cologne/perfume. "This stinks."

- But just a little bit of folly makes everything stink.
- One bad decision; one unrepentant person; one harsh word spoils everything.
- Be wise and stay away from folly.

V. 2: This is political conservatives favorite verse!

- Being left-handed is an advantage for a pitcher in baseball, but here is the left side that's the negative side. "Go with the right hander"
- The right symbolized strength, salvation, and support.
- The wise person is strong; experiences salvation and is protected by wisdom.
 - Jacob crossed his arms to place his right hand on Ephraim's head as a symbol of greater blessing.
 - Jesus sat down on the right hand of the Father (Col 3:1).
 - At the final judgment, the sheep will be on the right, but the goats will be on the left (Matthew 25:31-33).
- Going to the left is the sign of going the wrong way; the right is sign of living a wise life.

And it all flows out of his "heart."

- We go the wrong direction when our hearts have the wrong loves.
- "Guard your heart... the spring of life flows from it."
- How do we do this?
 - Direct your heart to God in prayer.
 - Direct your heart to God's Word.
- Many are looking for direction but are not giving due attention to their hearts.
 - Make sure your heart is in a good place as you consider your next decision.

- V. 3:** This is a typical mark of the fool – he thinks he’s wise and everyone else is foolish.
- The only person who doesn’t realize this person is foolish is the fool.
 - So avoid being this person.
 - How?
 - Prayer, Bible, Community (walk with the wise); be teachable; be humble.

Wisdom is powerful and effective

Wisdom is ruined by a little folly...

3. Wisdom is Needed in Leadership (10:4-7)

- This is one of many references to “kings” in this chapter.

V. 4: How do you deal with foolish leaders? **Carefully and calmly.**

- A quiet response turns away wrath.
 - “The terror of the king is like the growling of a lion; whoever provokes him to anger forfeits his life” (Prov 20.2). It’s not right, but it’s reality. Don’t poke the bear!
 - “A king’s wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it” (Prov. 16:14, NIV)
 - “With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone” (25:15).
- Respond with the character of Christ; by displaying the fruit of the Spirit.
- He’s not condoning abuse; that can never be accepted.
- But the loud-mouth angry leader will not be influenced if you shout back in anger.
- **1 Peter 2:13-15:** Christians “put to silence the ignorance of foolish people” by doing good deeds (1 Peter 2:13–15).
- **Respond like Christ:** “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten” (1 Peter 2:23), and in the power of Christ.

V. 5: Examples of Foolish Leadership (10:5-7)

- Kings who lack wisdom and courage will put the wrong people in leadership
- The people who should be in high places are not.
- Solomon’s son Rehoboam is a great illustration of this.
 - He did not listen to the advice of the wise counselors (he didn’t like what they had to say”, but listened to his friends.
 - In the words of Ecclesiastes, “He made the able men walk and he put the unqualified on horses.”
 - There was division in the kingdom (1 Kings 12:1–24).
- The verse is not saying that the poor cannot be the wise (we’ve already seen that in 9:15); nor that slaves can never be trusted for leadership (Joseph is one of many examples to say otherwise). It’s a generalization about those who are wise and qualified are often the one’s not in leadership.
- The point, if you are a leader you need to be wise.

4. Wisdom is Needed in Practical Situations (10:8-11)

The Teacher mentions several situations that show the value of wisdom – this time in our daily walk.

Verses 8-9: Four Accidents that Could Happen to Anyone

A. You could dig a **pit and cover it in order to capture an animal but fall into it yourself!**

(Read v. 8)

- Why? It could happen for a number of reasons, but the point is he didn't take proper precautions.

B. You could try to knock down a wall that happens to have a **snake in it! (Read v. 8b)**

- You can imagine a stone wall in Israel – homes/walls made of stone. You could imagine a fence. Snakes were known to hide in those crevices.
- So be wise or be bitten!

C. If you try to move heavy equipment you could hurt your back – if you're not wise!

(Read v. 9)

D. Splitting logs is dangerous; you could get hurt a number of way; the axe head could fly off and hit you in your head! (Read 9b)

These are humorous because they're so real.

We can see ourselves doing this in some careless moment!

Verses 10-11: The Wise by Contrast Avoid Dumb Mistakes!

V. 10: A foolish worker tries to cut wood with a dull axe!

- **“Work smarter not harder”** (as my uncle used to say)
- **Don't use a butter knife to cut a tree down!**
- The wise will use brains not just brawn and sharpen the axe.

Ryken: “If we are wise, therefore, we will take the time to prepare our blade. This principle applies to education. Be sure to get the best training, sharpening skills for effective service in the kingdom of God. It applies to relationships: a prudent courtship is far more likely to lead to a more successful marriage than a whirlwind romance. It applies to ministry. Before starting something new—planting a church, for example—make sure that you have everything you need to succeed.”

V. 11: Instead of charming the snake first, the fool approaches it like his pet. And the snake bites the fool.

- **Strange to us — not many people majoring in Snake Charming.** Trying to control the snake and not die. But if you wait too long, you'll get bitten.
- So this verse makes the opposite point.
- You can act too quickly in folly – not sharpening the blade.
- But you can also act too slowly – not charming the snake immediately.
- Some decisions have to be made immediately.

So verses 8-11, show us that the fool is careless, the fool over-worked because of lack of preparation and understanding, and the fool is over confident and not wise in decision-making.

We need wisdom in practical situations.

5. Wisdom Is Needed in Our Speech (10:12-15)

A. Fools use **destructive** words (v. 12)

- They destroy others and themselves.
 - “Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble.” (21:23)
- The wise win favor because they use gracious words that are fitting for the occasion (Prov 10:32; 25:11)
 - Jesus, the model of wisdom, always had the right words.
 - “The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary” (Isa 50:4)
 - Let’s pray that he Lord will use us during this time to speak a good word to the weary, not just blurt out non-sense off the top of our head.
 - We can stay connected as best as we can and speak encouraging words, speak wise words, comforting words, edifying words, words of praise to God.

B. Fools use **irrational** words (v. 13)

- He makes no sense.
- He would be better off being quiet.
- Titus 1:10: “Many are empty talkers”

C. Fools use **unrestrained** words (v. 14a)

- They are full of words – but say nothing.
- You talk too much...
- “A fool takes no pleasure in understanding; but only expressing his opinion” (Prov 18.2)

D. Fools use **boastful** words (14b-15)

- Ecclesiastes 10:14b (The Message): “Chattering stuff they know nothing about.”
- They talk about the future as if they know it, or are in control of it.
 - The wise, no “if the Lord wills” we will do this or that. (James 4)
- Reality: they can’t even get to the city.
- Perhaps because they won’t stop talking long enough to pay attention to the road signs!

6. Wisdom Is Needed in All of Life (10:16-20)

As I look at these final verses, there seems to be a recap of everything that has already been said regarding the value of wisdom:

• Leadership (v. 16-17) requires wisdom

- Real leaders are wise (v. 16, “child” refers to immaturity not necessarily age)

- Real leaders lead the country to blessing (v. 17).
 - They don't use resources for their own selfish purposes, but to strengthen them for the task.
- **Practical situations require wisdom (v. 18-19)**
 - One reason you can experience loss or disaster in practical situations is due to sloth. (v. 18)
 - The fool ignores responsibility.
 - One reason you need to work hard and use wisdom is to have bread, wine, and money! (v. 19)
 - Money has limitations -- we trust in God, not money.
 - But, practically speaking by working hard and making money we get necessities and enjoy pleasures.
 - Even more so, money can help advance the kingdom and build up God's people! (Let me encourage you to continue giving as you can during this season).
- **We need wisdom in our speech (v. 20).**
 - Once again the honorable treatment of the king is emphasized.
 - **Michael Eaton: "The verse challenges us to remain calm in days of national sloth, immaturity and indulgence, and calls for a submissive approach to authority, giving an expedient reason for obedience."**
 - Gossiping can get one in deep trouble, especially in a monarchy like this period.
 - Today's talk radio would not be tolerated!
 - This verse and others should say something about how you use social media.
 - Use it honorably.
 - Regarding our speech, it doesn't take much for the whole world to know about it.
 - **We say, "A little birdy told me"**
 - **"your mom knows everything you do ... she spies... And I know everything you do ... because she tells me"**
 - Be careful what you say! **One email, one text can do great damage!**

Through each of these verses, you see that wisdom **is effective and powerful** (it blesses the land; and it leads to food and wealth) and that a **little folly ruins wisdom** (just a little cursing of the king can do damage; a little laziness can lead to a crushed roof).

Conclusion

1. Life is unpredictable
2. Death is inevitable.
3. Wisdom is valuable.

Where do we go for wisdom? We go to Jesus.

Who does the whole world need today? They need Jesus.

Jesus is our righteousness, and our wisdom.

The wisest decision you can make is to believe on Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord.

He never made a foolish decision!

He was the poor wise man who delivered the people from disaster by something that no one would have imagined, dying and rising from the dead.

The cross looked like foolishness, but it was God's plan for salvation.

Our King has made away for us to have peace in the midst of uncertainty and our King has conquered death, through the resurrection.

¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor 15:19-20)

We have hope in the midst of disease, in the face of uncertainty, and on the brink of death, because Jesus Christ is alive and reigning!

Jesus was the son of nobility who came to earth to rescue us; and now gives us strength for service, and promises us a feast to come!

He is the King who rules the cosmos with wisdom.

We don't curse our King in our thoughts or in quiet, but we bless Him for his grace.

To the only wise King be glory forever and ever, Amen.