

XIV. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective

From Vanity to Vitality

“Wisdom for the Ages—Part 2”

Ecclesiastes 10

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We continue in this study on wisdom and folly which started in Ecclesiastes 9 in our last study. Ecclesiastes is a very profitable book and what is it that makes it profitable? It's one of the reasons why I insisted on the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes not only defensible, it's highly preferable and actually is part of what makes sense of this book and helpful for us to study it as it fits into the Solomonic trilogy of Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes. Proverbs is not a book of promises but a book of proverbial wisdom which is divinely ordained, conferred, and affirmed common sense.

For instance, I hear people say ‘I trained up a child in the way they would go and when they are old aren't they supposed to come to Jesus?’ Proverbs 22:6 says [6] *Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.* I believe there are promises to parents of covenant children but that's not one of them for that is not a promise that is given to us. It's a statement of divinely ordained common sense for those in parenting. What you are putting into the child, by in large comes out of the child and that is what this proverb is saying. It's the old ‘GIGO’ – garbage in garbage out or you could say Gospel in Gospel out. In other words, parenting has its effect, it's effective and does affect your child. Proverbs grants us insight into the law of God in terms of divinely ordained common sense.

Secondly there is the glorious picture of the Redeemer and His bride in the Song of Solomon as well as insights into the matter of a man and woman in their right relationship before the Lord, how one is to treasure one's wife and how one is to respond within the intimacy of marriage. It is a challenging book and I've preached through it once and I will not do it again. I stayed embarrassed for two entire chapters. It's an overwhelmingly challenging book in how to treat it and how to treat it practically with its insights and principles as well as it points to who Christ is and His bride and the intimacy we have in Christ as it is established.

So what about this book of Ecclesiastes? It is the third book in Solomon's trilogy and I think it's important for a Christian world and life view because here is an eye witness of a man who played the prodigal. He called upon God for wisdom and in his initial years God blessed him with wisdom, effectiveness and the kingdom extended to the promised borders as it did under the days of David and now even further. It was solidified and stabilized and then he went the way of the prodigal as he became fascinated with his own wisdom and worldly wisdom instead of Godly wisdom – the wisdom from below instead of the wisdom from above. He eventually descended into polygamy and the destruction it always brings is sexual anarchy in the life of rulers as it always destroys their leadership. He becomes a living example of it. I believe the book of Ecclesiastes is Solomon's statement of repentance giving you insight into his vanity – his striving after the wind, when he lives his life under the sun instead of the wisdom that comes from God.

There are two books of the Bible that for me defy outlining. One is the book of Proverbs and the other is the book of Ecclesiastes, in particular. Ecclesiastes 9 and 11 are particularly hard to outline because you have to work your way through not just verse by verse but line by line but in it he is giving the world view of folly and wisdom, how they interact with each other,

how one can pollute the other and how one can rescue the other. This book is particularly important in gaining a world and life view and it starts by being sober-minded. How do you see life? What are your filters in life? Practically speaking we have to do what the Word says which is to be sober-minded, watchful and resist the devil. Get into the means of grace, get connected with God's people, get disciplined, get into a small group, get into worship and bring the truth of the Gospel into your family. And that's what this means – how do you see life?

Do you see life from a Biblically framed world and life view – who God is, who you are, who you are apart from God, who you are because of God's grace, who Christ is, what He has done, who Satan is, what Satan does? How then shall you now live because of God's grace and by God's grace, not for grace but by grace? You develop a world and life view. Who are you? Are you a cosmic accident? If you're a cosmic accident then why do you keep asking 'why' every time something happens? The reason you ask 'why' is because you're not a cosmic accident. No you were made on purpose and with a purpose and in the image of God which is why you ask the question 'why' when things happen. You, instead of looking at 'why' under the sun, you look at it from the perspective of God-given wisdom from above that you pray for as the Spirit of God teaches you, and you find in the Word of God who you are, why you're here, why you're made, why God saves you and sustains you, what sin is, how grace is greater than sin, etc.

The world and life view of Christianity is the only thing that makes sense of why evil is in this world. It has the only remedy and solution to it. We have to come to that world and life view. In Ecclesiastes we have a man who began well with the Lord, played the prodigal as he went to a far country and fed in the pig trough and then God brought him back to his senses. His repentance and insights of wisdom and folly permeate this book of Ecclesiastes for us.

I always tell people that when I was growing up I was saved out of drug problem because my dad and mom always drug me to church every Sunday morning and night and every Wednesday night. My dad and mom made sure we were going to a church that preached the Bible. We were going to hear the Bible and we were going to have devotions. Then all of a sudden my dad became the prodigal for 15 years in a far country. Most of the time when people come to me about this prodigal issue it's usually about a son or daughter and I take them to the Scriptures, we talk about it and pray about it, but in my case it wasn't so much about my own children although they had their season of how God was working with them, but it was my dad. How do you minister to your father when he's the prodigal? That's exactly what Solomon was.

It was at the height of his placement at the hand of God when he played the prodigal. Now he is giving us insights on what folly does, what wisdom does and how in your life many times there is an interplay between the two. In Ecclesiastes 10 he starts it out with a word picture. Ecclesiastes 10:1 says *[1] Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.*

Here's an illustration to illustrate this illustration. I love a good omelet. To me a good omelet is made with three eggs. Let's say you have two good eggs and one bad egg. A bad egg smells awful but let's say you decide to use it anyway so you mix the bad one in with the two good ones. What happens to the two good eggs when you put the bad one in with them? It pollutes it and ruins the omelet. That is what Solomon is telling us in verse 1.

Think of the woman who poured the perfume that was worth a year's salary, on Jesus' feet to anoint Him. Here is this expensive perfume that Solomon is talking about that has somehow been left open and flies come, get into it and drown in it. Then the flies begin to decay in the perfume and it utterly ruins it. Now instead of a sweet aroma it is a fowl stench. Solomon

is saying that wisdom is the sweet aroma of the perfume and folly is the decay of the dead flies. So it doesn't take much folly to adulterate and ruin the perfume (wisdom). You can have great wisdom but if you mix in the way of folly you can bring it to a stench instead of a sweet aroma. Then he goes on to build on this.

Ecclesiastes 10:2 says [2] *A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left.* I can't tell you how many times I get this verse sent to me around an election time. This verse is not really a political statement but this is a prejudicial dynamic from the old world. Growing up I played a lot of different sports. In baseball I threw right handed but hit left handed. My dad liked to play golf and I also was interested in golf so when my dad said I could play I asked him to buy me some left-handed clubs. He said 'no' and I said 'why not?' I'll never forget my dad's response, 'Son, the world turns to the right, learn to play golf right-handed.' I don't know how proverbial true that is in wisdom but I do know what my dad was doing. He would give me his old clubs and that meant I had to learn to play right-handed.

That's the way it was back in the old world. A left handed person was not to be trusted. There is something perverse about them. This is not something I came up with for I'm just giving you context of 'B.C.' – before Christ comes. In fact, people would do whatever they could particularly if they were in a position of influence to hide their left-handedness, even learning to do things right-handed. So in this verse to the right is what is considered good and honorable and to the left is that which is considered perverse or untrustworthy, a fool's way. Let's continue.

Ecclesiastes 10:3 says [3] *Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool.* In other words, if you are with a fool long enough and listen to long enough, they will say things that let you know that foolishness has bound up their heart. The Bible says we speak from our heart and if you're quiet long enough and ask enough questions people will reveal whether their heart is being filled with wisdom or if it's bound up with folly. In other words, take a trip with someone and listen to them. He doesn't become something he is not when he is on a trip so it won't be long that he will begin to reveal he is a fool.

Ecclesiastes 10:4 says [4] *If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest.* It's here that I think it's important to remember that this is Solomon writing this. Solomon was a king. He had to deal with conspiracies, sons who would betray him, coups, etc. So here he is saying when someone is wise, the anger of a ruler that comes against you should not be the occasion of you becoming a revolutionary. It should not evoke a radical response. Is there a place and time where you have to stand against a ruler? If he is causing you to disobey God, yes. When a ruler uses the anger of man instead of the anger of God you are not use that to commit the folly of rebellion. You are a citizen, you are in submission, so continue your role. Don't let the improprieties of the ruler become the occasion for you to take on a revolt. You are to have calmness for that will lay great offenses to rest. Learn to be patient and calm when the ruler does that which is wrong. Learn how to correct the ruler.

Peter calls upon Christian citizens in I Peter to honor the king. Do you know what king he was referring to then? It was Nero. He was the Roman Emperor at that time. Peter wasn't calling them to a revolution either but to be in submission to those in authority over them. They were in a pagan empire. Peter even told wives with unbelieving husbands that by their submission and quiet behavior they could win them to the Lord. So when the ruler does something inappropriate, improper, or an offense out of anger don't leave your place

immediately to go in a place of resistance. Continue with submission in your place and your very behavior can be used to bring them to repentance.

So Solomon is giving us some insights of how wisdom and folly exist sometimes independently, sometimes interdependently where folly can impact wisdom or wisdom can impact folly. He has showed us how folly can impact the sweet aroma of wisdom and now he shows us how the wisdom of a citizen can correct the folly of a ruler in how you live and how you function. Sometimes folly has worked into our life and we need people with wisdom to rescue us from the folly that it may not pollute the wisdom in our life. Then we need to learn to act with wisdom to correct the folly in the lives of others. So all of us have mixed motives, mixed performance but you want to get on a journey of growing in the wisdom of God.

I thank God for the half-brother of Jesus, James who tells us in James 1:5–6, *[5] If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. [6] But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.* Where do you find the treasure trove of wisdom? You find it in His Word. The Spirit of God is the One who teaches you wisdom. The Spirit of God has also gifted wise counselors to help you and that's why wisdom puts together wise counselors. Let's continue in Ecclesiastes 10.

Ecclesiastes 10:5–7 says *[5] There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler: [6] folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. [7] I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves.*

Solomon is telling us not to get fascinated with power or riches for he has seen people with riches brought low and people with nothing raised up. Does this sound vaguely Biblical? There was a king so powerful that at three different times he was able to enslave God's covenant people. His name was Nebuchadnezzar. He built this image to himself. The Lord warned him through a dream that was interpreted by Daniel that he was going to be afflicted with something known today as boanthropy where he would spend seven years living like an animal with his face to the ground. His very finger nails would become like claws. He would have an animal like existence and that's where secular humanism always leads – the idolatry of self.

Then it says in Daniel 4:34–37, *[34] At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; [35] 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?"*

[36] At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me. My counselors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. [37] Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble. Wisdom came back to him and he declared that the Lord God most high was alone God and there was none like Him and his power was restored back to him as well.

He has seen a man thrown into a pit, sold into slavery and was a house slave. As a house slave he was honored by his master yet betrayed with false accusations by the master's wife. The man when from the pit to Potiphar's house and then to a prison. In prison he helped those who were leaving and then was abandoned in the prison. Yet he was brought from the prison and put into the palace and his name was Joseph. Solomon is telling us not to become enamored

with the king's court for the Lord can bring kings low and can raise slaves up into positions of kingship.

I want to speak to those who are pastors now. I believe it is right and appropriate for us to befriend those in power, pray for those in power and play the role and call of a prophet to those in power but don't try to curry the favor of those in power. You are out of your league preachers for they know how to use you. Don't give up being a prophet to the court by seeking a place in the court because when you seek a place in the court preachers usually become the jokers of the court. Christian, as well, don't be fascinated by power and influence, keep your eyes on the Lord for the Lord brings low those who are powerful when He raises up those whom we don't esteem in this world and the Bible is full of these instances and church history affirms it. Let's go on in the text.

Ecclesiastes 10:8–11 says *[8] He who digs a pit will fall into it, and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall. [9] He who quarries stones is hurt by them, and he who splits logs is endangered by them. [10] If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed. [11] If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer.*

This is an interesting collection of proverbs. I think he is doing a couple of things here. We have seen people dig the pit to capture others and how many times does God capture them in their own pit? How many times do people lay a trap for God's anointed and then they get caught in the trap that they have laid? There have been many times that they have tried to build a 'wall' to stop the Gospel using a legislative wall or a cultural wall and a snake crawls through the wall and bites those who built it. There have been many times things have been raised up in the wisdom of man and actually display the folly of man trying to thwart the plans of God.

I think there is something else that's here. In the normal course of life, we're in a broken world and things break, walls fall down, pits fall in. There are times when you're engaged in activity and it's amazing what God in His sovereignty will allow that is a trial and a difficulty to mature us. We don't live in a pristine world. You can't bubble wrap your children and please don't try. You can't bubble wrap life so please don't seek it. I'm not talking about not using common sense where you cross the road at the right time. God sovereignly uses this broken world for His own purposes, even when there are those who are building walls, digging pits and all kinds of things can happen.

Don't immediately think things have happened because someone has sinned because it may not be because they sinned. Do you remember the blind man in John 9? John 9:1–3 says *[1] As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. [2] And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" [3] Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."* God didn't bring this on this man due to punishment or discipline or retribution but this was something done to mature this man and to set up a witness to all who were watching. So learn to exercise great caution as we learn to interpret with great caution the 'catastrophes' and tragedies of life as we see them unfold.

Ecclesiastes 10:10 was very helpful to me. I tend to be an intense person and I try to hide it as much as I can. I am unbelievably mellow now. I wasn't a mellow person early on in my life or early on in my conversion. When I felt the call to the ministry I asked my wife if she was with me and she said she would be a missionary or pastor's wife and had been waiting for me to catch up. I felt I needed to go to seminary but my wife told me I had to finish college first. So I met with my spiritual father, Harold Jones and Dr. Rayburn from Covenant College Seminary.

So before I go further I want to remind you of Ecclesiastes 10:10; [10] *If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed.*

The way the wise man succeeds in this verse is by sharpening the axe. My spiritual father said to me in our meeting ‘Harry do you think it would be wiser to get a sharp axe to cut down trees or to get a blunt axe and beat on trees the rest of your life?’ I said ‘I think you ought to sharpen the axe.’ He said ‘Yes, I think you need to take the time to sharpen the axe. Don’t let you zeal make you do something unwise. Go sharpen the axe.’ Then to set the nail in my life I went to Dr. Rayburn and asked if he would make an exception for me to get into Covenant Seminary because I wanted to get on with it due to all the lost people out there. Dr. Rayburn was very gracious with me and said ‘I think you could do that but why don’t you enroll in Covenant College for at least one semester and if you don’t learn something with your life give me a call and I’ll bring you on up to the Seminary.’

He knew I would start getting the edge sharpened and I would see as wisdom in someone like me could even take over. We not only need wisdom but we need to know how to give wisdom to others patiently, thoughtfully and insightfully. Let’s continue in Ecclesiastes 10.

Ecclesiastes 10:12 says [12] *The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him.* Learn how to give wise counsel. If you speak from a heart bound up in foolishness it will consume your life but if you speak from a heart that is being filled with the wisdom of God then you find favor in the lives of others. Be thoughtful and prayerful in the response of how you work through the issues as people come to you for need of counsel or when people want to talk with you.

Ecclesiastes 10:13–15 says [13] *The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness, and the end of his talk is evil madness.* [14] *A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him?* [15] *The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.* In other words, if you live under the sun with the foolishness of man, and the philosophies and spirit of this age to guide you, instead of the Spirit of God and the wisdom of God through the Word of God then all of sudden you will find yourself meaninglessly talking.

One of the signs of pagans was that they would multiply words where people would just talk and talk and talk. Then others would say ‘now what are they saying? They really haven’t said anything.’ There is no purpose or insight or weight or ‘it’ in what they are saying and the foolish not only lose the ability to communicate profitably but the foolish lose their way in life. They get up and do the things in life but before long they think ‘where am I going?’ They are just a hamster at the wheel, peddling every day with no purpose or direction in what they are doing. They don’t even know where the city is that they are headed to. The believer with wisdom from God knows that there is a city whose Buildermaker is God. That city is being brought down to the new heavens and the new earth and it’s where our words and our work are taking us.

Ecclesiastes 10:16–17 says [16] *Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child, and your princes feast in the morning!* [17] *Happy are you, O land, when your king is the son of the nobility, and your princes feast at the proper time, for strength, and not for drunkenness!* Don’t you just sense that this is Solomon writing this? This is a man that knows royal palaces. This is a man that knows those that are bound up in folly live and rule and those bound up in wisdom ought to live and rule.

Here he is speaking of childish rulers not a child ruling although Josiah was one of the great kings in history and he was very young. Rulers who are childish are a bane to the people

and can be manipulated by folly. Doesn't Jesus say we're to have a childlike faith? Yes, but that means we're to have a simple, trusting faith, not a childish faith. We are not to have a childish life but when the childish are ruling it brings a reproach upon the people. When your princes arise in the morning to begin their drunken feasts, then what will happen to the people? But oh the land who has a ruler who was raised by nobility, who taught them the way of character, wisdom and groomed and disciplined them for the position of leadership. Oh the blessing when the princes in that land know when and why to eat and drink and what the morning and evening hours are for.

We need such leaders in our land (city, state, nation) and throughout the world. Look for those who have wisdom. Sometimes you can have a believer who is still entrapped in folly and is not a leader and you have can an unbeliever who by God's common grace, God has given wisdom to, but with a Christian world and life view you ought to prayerfully be able to discern that. You ought to be able to think your way through it as well. Let's finish with these last few verses in chapter 10.

Ecclesiastes 10:18–20 says *[18] Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks. [19] Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life, and money answers everything. [20] Even in your thoughts, do not curse the king, nor in your bedroom curse the rich, for a bird of the air will carry your voice, or some winged creature tell the matter.*

In other words, the problem isn't bread or drink or money for the problem is us when the bread or drink or money becomes our god. All of those things are amoral so the problem is us when we put those things in front of God. When you're in a bedroom or the privacy or a room or the workplace or when you think you're alone be careful what you say and about who you say it and be fully aware that you are not alone. There is no secret place from the Lord. He is always there.

Secondly, Satan is always on a reconnaissance mission. Thirdly have you ever heard of social media? The photographs are forever. The chat room is not deleted. I remember one time when I was in Charlotte that I received a letter and an email that was a death threat and it was turned over to a policeman who was in our church. I said to him 'But they can delete the email' and he said 'They think they are deleting the email but it will not get erased.' You need to know that your God is always with you so be careful what you say and how you say it. Satan is always on the prowl listening to you because you speak from your heart. So fill your heart with that which is good, excellent, and pure.

Philippians 4:8–9 says *[8] Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. [9] What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.* Let your mind and heart be filled with these things.

Always know there are very few secrets in a world that is tied together with the technology we have today. Do you really think that Siri is not reporting you to the advertisers? Do you really think that what we put out there doesn't really go out there, everywhere? My daughter gave me a great hint on this. I was talking about learning to ask questions and not to speak so quickly but fill our heart before we speak because from our heart the mouth speaks and we need to listen to others. My daughter handed me an index card that said 'W.A.I.T.' And I said 'I'm to wait before I talk?' 'Yes' I said 'So what does it stand for?' She said 'Why am I talking?' If you are, you're likely to get yourself into trouble and secondly you can't learn anything while you are talking. Why not think of three questions to ask them so they will talk?

The Proverb that seems to run through everyone is Proverbs 17:28 which says [28] *Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.* Some of us go ahead and talk and remove all doubt. The interesting insight on rulers just astounds me. I think of Mark Twain and his humor when this is said 'Joe is an idiot, Joe is a congressman, oh but I repeat myself.' Mark Twain said "Never argue with an idiot. They will drag you down to their level and beat you with experience." But don't be like Mark Twain and look at people of influence with envy or disdain. Learn how to relate to them with wisdom and learn to pray that they will have wisdom and it becomes a blessing to the land. Then ask God to give us a heart that is filled to overflowing with wisdom from His Word and by His Spirit. Let's pray.

Prayer:

God, thank You for the time for us to be together in this absolutely, overwhelming chapter with all of its insights and all the things you are putting before us. God, this is a whole lifetime of seeking to grow in wisdom. I think of that declaration of John the Baptist and that profile of our Savior in Luke 2:52 which says [52] *And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.* The key was that our Savior in His perfect humanity was submissive to His parents and in the synagogue. He actually learned the art of asking questions, even though He is the Teacher of all. God, would You help us to follow His example and to be filled with His wisdom and would You keep us from folly that would pollute wisdom? Would You give us wisdom that would chase away folly, the folly of work that is done with the foolishness of a life apart from God and the folly of words that are spoken with the foolishness of a life apart from God? Foolishness is defined for the fool has said 'there is no God' (Psalm 14:1), but we O God, love You because You first loved us. Would You in Your love fill us to overflowing with wisdom from above, for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.