

Seasoned, Humbled Wisdom

Ecclesiastes 9:17 – 11:6

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¹⁷ The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. ¹⁸ Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench;
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

² A wise man's heart inclines him to the right,
but a fool's heart to the left.

³ Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense,
and he says to everyone that he is a fool.

⁴ If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place,
for calmness will lay great offenses to rest.

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.

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.

¹² The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor,
but the lips of a fool consume him.

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.

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!

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.*

*11 Cast your bread upon the waters,
for you will find it after many days.*

*² Give a portion to seven, or even to eight,
for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.*

*³ If the clouds are full of rain,
they empty themselves on the earth,
and if a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.*

*⁴ He who observes the wind will not sow,
and he who regards the clouds will not reap.*

⁵ As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.

⁶ In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

Intro: As We Mature . . .

I am thankful that I have been a believer from a very young age. I have also been involved in ministry in one form or another for most of my life. Our youth group in high school was youth-led, so I was teaching youth group Bible studies at 16 years old, and I preached my first sermon at age 17, my second at age 18, during Youth Sundays at my Baptist church in Virginia. Several years ago, I found a cassette tape recording of the sermon I preached when I was 18, which was about how to detect and avoid false teachers. It was an amusing listen. I still believe essentially the same things I believed in at the age of 18, though I'm obviously not a Baptist anymore. Still, I don't remember listening to that sermon and thinking it was wrong, so much as I remember thinking that it was immature and not at all the way I would preach on that topic now.

Hopefully, as we mature, our perspective on God and our faith matures, too. We may hold many of the same core convictions we held when we were younger, but we hold them differently, hopefully with more humility and grace as we are confronted repeatedly by the complexities and uncertainties of life under the sun.

A. Solomon: From Proverbs to Ecclesiastes

Portions of Ecclesiastes read much like the book of Proverbs, full of short, two-line proverbial statements of wisdom. Many of these proverbs reflect the same kinds of wisdom and insight as in the Book of Proverbs, but something seems to have happened to Solomon in the years between Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Now, we don't know for sure when Solomon preached/wrote Ecclesiastes, but as we'll see next week, it does seem it was in his old age, as he was nearing death. The portions of Proverbs written by Solomon seem to come from an earlier time in his life, when his son was approaching young adulthood – so, maybe when Rehoboam was 12 or 13.

Traditional history timelines say that Solomon died of natural causes at the age of 80 in about the year 931 BC. Rehoboam is thought to have been born around 972 BC, and so perhaps Solomon's Proverbs date from 960-955 BC. If Ecclesiastes dates from around 935 BC, when Solomon was around 76 years old, then Rehoboam may have been around 35-37 years old by the time of the preaching of Ecclesiastes. Solomon seems to know he will not live much longer, and he seems to know Rehoboam will inherit his throne and kingdom and that Rehoboam may not have paid close attention to the wisdom lessons Solomon tried to give him in his teen years. Solomon's audience seems to be the royal court of nobles and officials, including his son.

What had happened in Solomon's life between Proverbs and Ecclesiastes? Well, a lot of hard-earned life experience, some of it earned from foolishness, sin and faithlessness to God. Solomon married a large number of foreign women to make political alliances with surrounding countries. We're told this sad story of the faithlessness of Solomon in 1 Kings 11:

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women, along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods." Solomon clung to these in love. He had 700 wives, who were princesses, and 300 concubines. And his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and did not wholly follow the Lord, as David his father had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods. – 1 Kings 11:1-8, ESV

If all we had was the account of Solomon's life in 1 Kings, we would have to conclude that Solomon rebelled against God, worshipped idols, and died in unfaithfulness. Yet it seems hard to believe that a man who wrote three books of the Bible – Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and most of Proverbs – as well as several of the Psalms, could have died in unfaithfulness and apostasy. I believe Ecclesiastes is the answer to the question of what happened to Solomon at the end of his life.

Solomon seems to have truly repented and returned to the Lord and set out to instruct the court he had led astray. He seems to be seeking to set things right before he dies. He definitely seems much more mature and humbler. It's not that what Solomon wrote in Proverbs was wrong; it is the inspired word of God and the wisdom of the second-wisest man who ever lived. Yet Solomon failed to follow his own advice; he failed to live up to his own standards. I know we as parents have never been guilty of giving our children wise advice that we then fail to follow ourselves, have we? Of course we have! Afterward, we might return and give them some of the same advice again, but now it's tempered with humility because of our failings.

B. Wisdom and Foolishness, 9:17-10:3, 10-15

17 The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. 18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.

*Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench;
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.*

² *A wise man's heart inclines him to the right,
but a fool's heart to the left.*

³ *Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense,
and he says to everyone that he is a fool.*

These words from the end of chapter 9 and the beginning of chapter 10 contrast wisdom and foolishness with a hint of humble remorse when we understand Solomon's position and life story. Solomon's the king, after all, so he is drawing some attention away from himself when he says, "The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools." Similarly, when he says that "one sinner destroys much good" and "a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor," he is speaking from experience. His foolishness in taking foreign, idol-worshiping wives and then his sin is building worship space for their idols on the mountain outside Jerusalem brought the judgment of God upon his flourishing kingdom and destroyed much good, outweighing years spent in wisdom and honor building his kingdom.

In 1967, the poem "A Builder or a Wrecker" by Charles Benvegar was published. It captures well the truth of what Solomon is saying:

A Builder or a Wrecker

As I watched them tear a building down
A gang of men in a busy town
With a ho-heave-ho, and a lusty yell
They swung a beam and the side wall fell

I asked the foreman, "Are these men skilled,
As the men you'd hire if you wanted to build?"
He gave a laugh and said, "No, indeed,
Just common labor is all I need."

"I can easily wreck in a day or two,
What builders have taken years to do."
And I thought to myself, as I went my way
Which of these roles have I tried to play?

Am I a builder who works with care,
Measuring life by rule and square?
Am I shaping my work to a well-made plan
Patiently doing the best I can?

Or am I a wrecker who walks to town
Content with the labor of tearing down?
"O Lord let my life and my labors be
That which will build for eternity!"

Wisdom and folly are contrasted by Solomon in Proverbs, too – perhaps most brilliantly in Proverbs 9, where wisdom and folly are personified as two women who each call out to travelling men walking through a city, inviting them to come into their houses. Wisdom has a table well prepared with good food. Folly promises the delights of stolen water and bread eaten in secret – in other words, she has nothing real to offer – and those who enter her house don't realize that her meal is served in the grave.

To clarify something: Verse 2 has nothing to do with our modern political spectrum: “A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left.” The language of “left wing” and “right wing” and “centrist” in politics actually comes out of the French Revolution's National Assembly long, long after the days of Solomon. Rather, for Solomon, the right hand is the hand of strength and skill, and the right is the place of honor next to a ruler. The left is the opposite – weakness and dishonor.

For us, as believers, we know that Jesus is the embodiment of wisdom, and we're told that He sits at God's right hand. In Old Testament language, Jesus is often prophetically referred to as “*the right hand of the Lord*,” as in Psalm 118:14-16 –

*The LORD is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation.
Glad songs of salvation
are in the tents of the righteous:
“The right hand of the LORD does valiantly,
the right hand of the LORD exalts,
the right hand of the LORD does valiantly!” (ESV)*

In verses 12-15, Solomon further unpacks the contrast between wisdom and folly –

¹² *The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor,
but the lips of a fool consume him.*
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.*

Verses 12-14 focus on our words. The words of a wise man win him favor. Wise people know how to speak in a way that is honest and upright but also tactful and appropriate, not selfish or insulting or deceitful.

Sadly, Solomon's son, Rehoboam, who was most likely in the audience for this sermon/lesson did not heed the wise advice of these verses but embodied the speech of a fool when he inherited the kingdom from his father. 1 Kings 12 tells us that when Rehoboam became king, representatives from the people met with him, requesting relief from the heavy tax burden and service requirements Solomon had placed

on the people. The people said, “Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke on us, and we will serve you.” (1 Kings 12:4, ESV)

Rehoboam took counsel with the older advisors of the court and also with the younger advisors. The older advisors said,

“If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever.”⁸ But he abandoned the counsel that the old men gave him and took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him.⁹ And he said to them, “What do you advise that we answer this people who have said to me, ‘Lighten the yoke that your father put on us?’”¹⁰ And the young men who had grown up with him said to him, “Thus shall you speak to this people who said to you, ‘Your father made our yoke heavy, but you lighten it for us,’ thus shall you say to them, ‘My little finger is thicker than my father’s thighs.’¹¹ And now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.”

¹² So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam the third day, as the king said, “Come to me again the third day.”¹³ And the king answered the people harshly, and forsaking the counsel that the old men had given him,¹⁴ he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, “My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.” . . .

¹⁶ And when all Israel saw that the king did not listen to them, the people answered the king, “What portion do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To your tents, O Israel! Look now to your own house, David.” So Israel went to their tents . . .¹⁸ Then King Rehoboam sent Adoram, who was taskmaster over the forced labor, and all Israel stoned him to death with stones. And King Rehoboam hurried to mount his chariot to flee to Jerusalem.¹⁹ So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day. (1 Kings 12:7-19, ESV)

Our words reveal our hearts, often whether we want them to or not. Jesus said, “Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.” So, it’s not enough to have sound advice on right speech, but we need to have our hearts changed.

How different are the words of foolish Rehoboam from the words of the Gracious and Wise King Jesus: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30, ESV)

C. Wisdom and Folly in Ruling, 10:5-7, 16-17, 20

Solomon explores the application of wisdom and folly to ruling, governing people, which is very appropriate to his audience:

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.

This first observation of folly is a challenging one for us to appreciate, because our society values egalitarianism, the ideology that says that everyone is absolutely equal, meaning absolutely the same. We think, “Well, maybe the slaves should be riding on horseback and the princes should be humbled to walk on the ground like slaves.”

But this is upside-down thinking. God created people differently, even though we are all equal. We have different gifts and we fit best in different roles in life, based on our gifting, our ability, and our work ethic. This doesn’t mean the rich and powerful should oppress the poor and needy, though. It’s just an acknowledgement that some people have skills and abilities to lead, and they should be in positions of leadership. Otherwise, everyone suffers.

This evil of upside-down positioning proceeds from the king. Why? Because the king is less threatened by having ignorant, simple slaves in positions of power and authority, and he removes the wise and experienced leaders and puts them lower, because he sees them as a threat to himself.

Then, Solomon makes an even more pointed observation about the character and conduct of the leaders of a land:

*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!*

The character of our leaders matters. If they are childish, foolish, self-indulgent, and gluttonous drunkards, the whole land will suffer.

D. Wisdom and Folly in Work, 10:10-11, 18

Solomon also gives descriptions of the application of wisdom and folly to work:

*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.*

*¹⁸ Through sloth the roof sinks in,
and through indolence the house leaks.*

If you don't approach your work with wisdom, forethought, planning, and diligence, you will surely suffer the consequences.

Much of the advice Solomon gives in these verses is good, sound sanctified common sense, very much in keeping with the teaching of Proverbs. Apparently, Rehoboam didn't heed the advice very well in his teens, so maybe Solomon is hoping he'll listen better now.

E. Wisdom and Unpredictability, 10:8-9, 11:1-6

And yet, the advice in Ecclesiastes is different; it is more mature, humbler and more seasoned by experience. One of the ways we see this is in the acknowledgment of the unpredictability of life. Verses 8-9 of chapter 10 are not easy to understand at first:

*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.*

While it is good to work hard, sometimes bad things happen to people while they are working. These are realities we have to acknowledge and accept. Certain kinds of work carry certain risks, and those risks have to be taken into account.

The tone of uncertainty intensifies as we transition into Chapter 11:

*Cast your bread upon the waters,
for you will find it after many days.*

*² Give a portion to seven, or even to eight,
for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.*

*³ If the clouds are full of rain,
they empty themselves on the earth,
and if a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.*

*⁴ He who observes the wind will not sow,
and he who regards the clouds will not reap.*

⁵ As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.

⁶ In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

If life is uncertain, what should we do? Some people are paralyzed by life's uncertainties and decide not to do anything. Jesus told the Parable of the Talents to illustrate what some people do who are paralyzed by fear. You'll find the parable in Matthew 25:14-30. The Master in the parable gives one man five talents, another man two talents, and a third man one talent. The issue is not how much they were given but what they did with what they were given. The man who was given five earned five more. The man who was given two earned two more. Both men were equally commended and rewarded. The man who was given one talent buried it in fear and refused to take a risk and invest what he had been given.

Solomon here acknowledges that life is unpredictable. But he calls us to be generous, to diversify our investments, and to work harder. Because we're not in control and we can't predict the future, we should hold more loosely to what we have, be more ready to give it away (even "foolishly") or to invest it in a variety of ways. We should also work harder, not knowing for sure what will be successful. Through it all, we have to recognize that we are not in control.

Conclusion: Humble and Wise Risk-Taking & Trust

I like the wisdom of Proverbs. It is solid, helpful, and practical. I consider Proverbs to be the Law of Wisdom, establishing clear principles for behavior and wise living. It is good advice from a father to a teenage son and from our Heavenly Father to us. Yet the Law is only of limited use in the life of any believer. The Law can guide and direct us, but it does not change us. It does not break and mend our hearts. That work must be done by the Gospel.

Ecclesiastes shows us a more mature and humbled Solomon. He has seen the cost of his own sin and has experienced the unpredictability and even the apparent contradictions of life under the sun. The wise advice of Proverbs is still wise advice, but Solomon has learned that it has not changed his own heart, much less his son's, and that it doesn't account for all of the maddening complexities of life.

So, I think of Ecclesiastes as the Gospel of wisdom. The Gospel breaks our hearts of our self-reliance and teaches us to depend on the grace of God in Christ. Solomon has learned not to trust himself and not to try to predict or control life, but to walk in repentance and faith instead. The Gospel still calls us to walk by wisdom, but it is a wisdom that flows from a changed heart, a humbled heart, a self-doubting, God-trusting, generous heart, a heart shaped by grace. May the Lord lead us in this kind of wisdom!