



Ecclesiastes

Does Life Have Meaning?

Wisdom is Better Than Folly

Ecclesiastes 10:1-20

Ecclesiastes 10:1 is a continuation of the thought found in the last verse of chapter 9. In 9:18, Qoheleth says that "...one sinner destroys much good." Now in 10:1 he adds that a few dead flies can destroy an expensive perfume. The perfume becomes less than useful because it now gives off a stench, the exact opposite of its intended purpose. In a similar way a foolish action can outweigh many wise and honourable deeds.

1. Describe how a single foolish action (or a small number of foolish actions) can overshadow a lifetime of wise and honourable endeavours.

Because of the destructive nature of sin (folly) each person should carefully consider how he lives. Every decision to sin runs the risk of ruining our reputation in this world as well as our relationship with God.

The right hand represented "strength, power, and justice" while the left represented "perversion, incompetence, and weakness"¹ therefore a wise man will incline his heart to the right. The foolish person shows himself to be senseless every time he steps outside his house. His actions proclaim his folly to all.

In verse 4, a ruler becomes angry and the wise response to that ruler is restraint. If you are acting wisely, do not change course, but remain calm and steady. Sometimes we refer to this as acting with "composure" in the face of adversity. Acting with restraint can often diffuse a tense situation with a foe who has superior strength or position. (See Proverbs 15:1 and 25:15)



2. How does a soft answer turn away wrath?

The ruler in verse 4 is unwise and volatile and in verses 5-7 we see an example of his foolish reign. In verse 5, his error is not intentional, but nevertheless demonstrates incompetence and unfitness to rule. This ruler places inept people in places of authority in the government and the natural social order is not maintained. The foolish are in charge while those who have wisdom and ability are placed in subservient positions.

¹ Bland, Dave L. *The College Press NIV Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, & Song of Songs*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 2002), 378.

3. Why are inept and incompetent people often found in places of authority?

In verses 8-11 proverbs are used to illustrate what can happen when one acts with folly instead of wisdom. In the first, a man digs a pit and then falls into it. Some believe the pit was designed to snare another, but the person himself is caught in the trap.² An even simpler possibility is that the person who dug the pit carelessly and foolishly fails to take precaution around the danger he has created.

The next illustration is of a man who breaks through a wall, but fails to consider what is on the other side. In this case it is a venomous snake which bites him.



Next a man who quarries stones is hurt by them and a man who splits logs is endangered by them. These are dangerous, but necessary jobs which should be undertaken with proper precaution or a man may be seriously harmed through a careless accident. A wise man plans and prepares for his endeavours as demonstrated by the sharpening of the axe.

In verse 11 the ancient eastern act of snake charming is used to illustrate the uselessness of wisdom that is not used. Here a snake charmer allows the venomous snake to bite before employing his professional skill of charming the snake.

4. What do the illustrations in verses 8-11 have in common?

5. What practical lessons can we learn from verses 8-11?

In verses 12-15 Solomon describes the difference between the words and actions of the wise and the words and actions of the foolish. A wise man speaks in such a way to win him favour and his words are gracious, kind, persuasive, and endearing. Conversely, the fool speaks words that bring him disfavour with others and are destructive to himself.

6. How does a wise man gain favour through his words?

The fool starts by speaking lunacy and the more he talks the more ignorant and evil he becomes. He starts badly, but finishes much worse through his incessant babbling about matters of which he knows nothing. This ignorant man demonstrates his foolishness to all. In verse 14, words pour from his mouth in mindless abundance about what will happen in the future, but Solomon has written time and time again throughout Ecclesiastes that even the wisest man does not know what will happen tomorrow.



² Kidwell, R. J. *Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1977), 249.

In verse 15, the foolish man labours unproductively until exhausted, but does not even have the common sense to find his way to the city over a clearly marked path and often traveled path. This is roughly equivalent to saying today, “He doesn’t have enough sense to come in out of the rain.” Qoheleth is portraying the foolish man in the most unflattering way possible.

7. Why do fools tend to talk too much?

In verses 16-17 foolish and wise national leadership is contrasted. The first king is described as a mere child, but many scholars believe Solomon is thinking of Rehoboam who ruled and acted like a child even though he was forty when he became king³ (see 2 Chronicles 13:7 and 1 Kings 12:1-14). Rehoboam took advice from the young men he had grown up with instead of listening to the counsel of the older men.

In verse 16, the princes eat heavy meals in the morning, wasting their time and making them sluggish, instead of attending to the affairs of the nation. They should have done their work and then eaten later in the day.

A better leadership model is found in verse 17 where the king comes from a good background. This king comes from a noble family and has received a good education. Likewise the princes take care of the affairs of state before sitting down to a feast. Even in their feasting they eat “for strength” or to sustain themselves instead of becoming gluttons and drunkards.

8. What woe comes to a nation with inexperienced and childish leadership? (vs. 16)

In verses 18-19 a nation that has been neglected by its rulers is in view. These leaders have been slothful or exceedingly lazy and self-centred. The country is like a house what has not received proper care and maintenance. This house has a roof which sags and leaks because of the laziness and neglect of the owner. The rulers have lived lavishly, feasting and drinking, while believing that money held the answer to every problem. These leaders viewed their people as a source of endless money as they excessively taxed their citizens. In the case of Rehoboam massive taxation led to the loss of the ten tribes.⁴



Though a person may have to live under the authority of a corrupt king or government, the wise man will carefully weigh his words and not curse the king. Speaking out against a corrupt government could bring danger to self and family. The rich are the business owners and government officials and it is not prudent even to criticise them in the privacy of the home lest someone overhear you and carry them news of your lack of respect for them. Verse 20 is the origin of the common phrase, “A little bird told me.”⁵

³ Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 797.

⁴ Kidwell, R. J. *Ecclesiastes & Song of Solomon*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1977), 258.

⁵ Bland, Dave L. *The College Press NIV Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, & Song of Songs*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 2002), 385.

9. When is it prudent and when is it imprudent to criticise those in authority?

We learn the following lessons in Ecclesiastes 10:

1. A single sin or act of folly can overshadow much wise and righteous living.
2. Many accidents can be avoided by careful planning and thoughtful execution.
3. A wise man will weigh his words and will speak in ways which are gracious, kind, persuasive, and endearing.
4. Those who speak endlessly (and with a belief in their own superior knowledge) are often the most foolish.
5. Foolish and incompetent people often find themselves in positions of leadership. They can be corrupt and vicious. The wise person will tread cautiously and criticise them at his peril.