
Dangers

Ecclesiastes 9:13-10:20

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Christian realism recognizes some basic truths reflected in this text.

Some of life is mundane. It is not exciting. It does not “snap, crackle, pop”. It is not dazzling. It is just the same o’ same o’ day after day.

Some of life is common sense. Living in the real world sometimes just means using our common sense. Yet many do not.

All of life requires wisdom. We need it not just for the big things, the major decisions, but also for the seemingly inconsequential, the small things.

But we will learn something here that is necessary for us and that we must weigh carefully. A little folly can ruin even great wisdom.

This text defies almost all organization. It is not truly Hebraic in structure, nor is it seemingly organized by category. Maybe that is the point...

We try to organize our life into manageable bits or categories...

God allows enough chaos to overturn dependence on your own wisdom...

You cannot make the Garden of Eden out of thorns and thistles and painful childbirths...

Life is not clean, ordered or manageable. That does not mean we do not try. But the fallenness of our world can only be totally reversed by a new creation.

The Opening Illustration (9:13–18)

Sets the stage for Solomon's observations of different kinds of character, conduct and warnings attached to them...

¹³ I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me.

¹⁴ There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. ¹⁵ But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. ¹⁶ But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.

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.

The Saving Acts (v. 13-15a)

By his wisdom a poor but wise man once saved his town. A powerful king's armies had surrounded it. They had laid siege to his town with great effort and expense. Though we do not know how, he was able through his wisdom to save the town.

The Sad Reality (v. 15b)

His great achievements were soon forgotten. Even in the telling of it in this text, how he did it is not related. It is not remembered. Sadly, no one commemorated what he had done. Why was that? He was not remembered because he was poor. The poor are often forgotten in their achievements.

The Strong Conclusion (v. 16-18)

Wisdom is still better than strength! Strength may still overcome. But it is better to achieve through wise use of means, than by brute force or strength. Even if the world is deaf to the wisdom or scoffs at the wisdom, still speak it. Still live by it.

In the real world, many gain attention and win the day with shouting. But so often their words and ways are folly. The wisdom that reflects God's thinking is often quiet and peaceful. Of this the New Testament reminds us in James 3:17-18:

¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

So the quiet wisdom of the poor and lowly brings defeat to the powerful and mighty. Jesus came as poor and lowly, full of wisdom. He confounded the wise and the religious. He defeated our enemy. But Jesus will not be forgotten. He will be greatly prized and much praised.

The Unexpected Incongruities (10:1-7)

Christian realism recognizes the ironies, the incongruities in the world. Solomon points some out to us to set our minds to thinking about them. We live in a fallen world. Many things work well. Most things will break.

A Little Folly (v. 1)

¹ Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

This could almost be the overall theme of this text. It is an unexpected unsuitableness. It is ironic. Dead flies do not belong in perfume. But their stench will overwhelm even the good fragrance. In the same way, a little folly ruins wisdom and honor. This is not what we expect. We think that wisdom will overcome folly. But that is not what Solomon observes. When you mix folly and wisdom you will get a stench.

A Heart's Inclination (v. 2)

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

² A wise person chooses the right road; a fool takes the wrong one. [NLT]

Be careful. In the political climate it is easy to read this verse with a knowing chuckle. But that is not the sense here. There is quite some discussion about what this means. The language itself is about the inclination of the heart. The fool has a disposition of the heart. His heart is inclined to something while the wise person is inclined to something else. This is described as the left hand versus the right hand.

Many commentators and translations like the NLT and others think the reference is to the wrong road versus the right road. The heart of the fool is usually inclined to choose the wrong road. The heart of the wise is inclined to choose the right road. In this case, the left hand is being associated with the wrong road and the right hand with the correct road. Frankly, this is a bit hard to come to.

Another view is quite different and relies on understanding some background. It has to do with the cultural customs. The left hand was associated with bodily functions. The right hand with eating and writing. So the inclinations here are not on a political or economic continuum. The fool's heart moves toward the wrong road or toward the dirty, the dark, the dung. The wise heart moves toward the right road and what sustains, strengthen and lifts up life.

An Unavoidable Exposure (v. 3)

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

I love this one. A road is supposed to be a safe place to walk. There maybe horses and carriages, but most of the traffic is going to be people. Because he lacks sense, the way the fool walks on the road exposes him as a fool. This unexpected inaptness means that the fool is never safe from exposing his folly.

A Surprising Strategy (v. 4)

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

In a good way, our natural tendency is to flee from danger. Sometimes, the tendency when faced with the anger of an authority is to try to placate the anger. Both reveal fear and desperation. In the real world, fear and desperation tend to draw out the pursue and destroy reflex in powerful. Do not allow provocations to drive you into rash responses. So, be calm. Don't quit. Don't leave your place. Respond with a meekness and calmness. What underlies this sense of calmness in the face of trouble is trust in God. 1 Peter 3:1-6 commends this to wives. Here, Solomon reminds us of this surprising strategy.

An Unacceptable Reversal (v. 5-7)

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.

These verses indicate that some reversals of fortune are not desirable. No, in fact they are evil and will bring evil. Through a series of situations, Solomon points us the fact that sometimes the elevation of the lowly, of the unworthy, of the unqualified, particularly

when done by an authority, results in the spread of evil. So, the elevation of folly and the unsuitable reversal of roles soon will lead to evil. This is exacerbated when that elevation is by the one in authority. It doesn't take much for bad leaders to ruin even a good church, a good business, a good nation.

Because Solomon is a king, many of these observations are in the realm of politics. He has seen so much of the folly we associate with politics. It has little changed from the days of Solomon to our days. As Christian realists, we recognize that corrupting power of political power. Yet, we generally observe that there is a perverse kind of crafty wisdom that soon becomes folly. It may be inclined to regularly choose the wrong road or to choose the dirty, the dark, the depraved. Certainly, we often observe that leaders and politicians, even good ones, often make foolish decisions.

The Worker's Dangers (10:8-11)

Where a little folly can spoil great wisdom, Solomon offers warnings to those who labor in the world. Here is where common sense meets common situations and warns of dangers.

Beware in your Relationships (v. 8)

⁸ He who digs a pit will fall into it, and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall.

This is an old and useful warning. If you dig a pit or a trap for others, beware, lest you fall into it (v. 8a). We have all heard this. And it is so true. God has built a sense of poetic justice into the world. Too many fall into the very things they were going to use to harm someone else.

If you demolish an old, established boundary or wall, beware lest a snake bite you (v. 8b). Those walls and boundaries have good reason to exist. In the nature of things, snakes hide in shadows or bask on stones. Trouble will come if you disturb what is best left standing.

Beware in your Work (v. 9)

⁹ He who quarries stones is hurt by them, and he who splits logs is endangered by them.

There are many dangers attendant to our vocations. Here is just common sense. But so many people go to their work and are oblivious of the dangers that surround them. Two different kinds of work are being addressed. There are those who are working in heavy industry represented in their day by quarrying. Working a quarry, take caution lest the stones crush you. The very nature of the work exposes the worker to the danger. On the opposite side of the scale is the casual work done by most men around their house. This is illustrated by splitting logs for firewood. So the homemaker is warned to take caution against accidents happening.

The theme here is that if we are to live wisely in the fallen world, we must recognize that accidents happen. No one is invulnerable. We live in a fallen world. Accidents and dangers and harm are a part of it. We cannot live in this world under the sun without risk.

Beware of your Tools (v. 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.

Not many of us are familiar with chopping wood. The warning here is to beware, lest the dull axe strike you (10:9b-10). A sharp axe may be more deadly but less risky. A dull axe tends to bounce or skate off the surface. A wise worker will keep us tools share and in good condition. Now many of our tools for work are technology based. But the principle still holds true. You must maintain your equipment, or it will become dangerous and may harm you or your work.

Beware of your Timing (v. 11)

¹¹ If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer.

This one is actually biting sarcasm. If a snake bites before the charmer charms, then the charmer is likely dead. He failed to anticipate the timing and the danger. It is useless to deal with a problem that has already completed its damage. Yet people do this all the time. Anticipate the problem. Deal with issue. It is certainly no advantage to you if the problem bites you and destroys you.

The Fool's Description (10:12-15)

The fool's folly emerges in two major aspects of his life.

His Words (v. 12-14)

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?

The fool tends to three troubling tendencies in his talk.

He tends toward talk that, instead of winning people to him, eventually turns people against him. IT may not start like that. But the tendency in fools is talk that develops enemies.

He tends toward talk that begins in foolishness but ends up just being irrational. It may not be a full blown, gibbering madness. But it will certainly be not rational, not reasoning, not fitting to the world as it is.

He tends toward talking more and more and saying less and less. Even though no one knows what will be in the future, the fool blathers on like he knows exactly what he is talking about and how it will unfold. Eventually, his talk leaves people wondering what he is actually talking about.

The NLT captures this well:

¹³ Fools base their thoughts on foolish assumptions, so their conclusions will be wicked madness; ¹⁴ they chatter on and on. No one really knows what is going to happen; no one can predict the future.

Want to see this in action today? Watch the foolish, self-consuming, irrational and unintelligible talk of some of today's progressives in economics, politics and the media. It is almost too easy...

His Works (v. 15)

¹⁵ The toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.

The talk of a fool consumes him. The work of the fool tires him. But don't we all become tired or even weary in our work? On the face of it, the text says that the fool gets so tired in his work that he has no strength to go home. But, could there be more given the words that Solomon has chosen?

Solomon has often used language in Ecclesiastes that harkens back to the book of Genesis. We are reminded that we live in the real world. This real world is not the Garden of Eden. This real world we live in is fallen and cursed. This is the place and time of toil. The work of the garden has become the toil in this present age. There will one day be a new creation in which our work will no longer be toiling in thorns and thistles.

But now we toil. We use different words for it, but it is still *toil*. The fool's toils are wearisome because of the second phrase. The fool's toil is wearisome because he does not know the way home, the way to the city. His is stuck in the field of his toils. In the larger arc of the Bible, the wise person toils but is not wearied in the same way. The wise person knows the way home. We know the end. We know the way to the city of God. We are not stuck in the fields of our toil. We labor in these fields in the hope of a harvest later.

The Nation's Leaders (10:16-17)

In the real world we have to recognize the great effect poor leaders can have even on a great nation.

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!

Once again, a small amount of folly can ruin much wisdom.

What brings Trouble (v. 16)

Two problems in leaders will bring trouble to those under their authority.

The first is immaturity. Now this may be because of age or experience. In Solomon's day, sometimes children were kings and others ruled through them as proxies. But the general principle is that immaturity in leaders will bring much trouble to those they lead. Immaturity is not merely a result of youth. Immaturity is a result of a lack of experience or a lack of insight and discretion. Almost by definition, the immature will be fools. To be led or governed by people who are childish, self-focused, see life as a game and work as play will bring many difficulties. Some of you have worked in

situations like this. Many of us have watched as amazingly immature adults have been elected, not once, but over and over again to political office. This is sad. But this is the way it is in this world under the sun.

So we long for the day when the ancient of days, in deep and solemn wisdom and eternal maturity, will rule and reign over the new creation.

What brings Good (v. 17)

This longing is hinted at in the blessing of what brings good. We are blessed when led by those whose background, education and experience has prepared them for wise and mature leadership. We know these kind of people because they have a serious and sober approach to life. Yes, they can feast and celebrate. But they do so at the right times and in the right ways. They are not inclined to drunkenness. This is the kind of leadership that brings good and blessing, even in this hard place of sin and curse.

But there will be a day when the noble Son of the heavenly Father will rule. He will bring the good we long for. We are then able to serve and submit well now for we know with an assured hope that it will come to pass. We live now in the knowledge that our present blessedness and happiness are simply foretastes of the eternal blessedness and happiness yet to come.

The Heart's Attitudes (10:18-20)

Now we come to the close of this section. The unifying thread here seems to be in noting our thinking, our attitudes.

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 some ways, Solomon's warnings here are also commending their opposite.

Apathy in Needed Work (v. 18)

Sloth is a great old word. Here is the lazy, indolent person whose roof is leaking and now begins to sag. Remember that houses in Solomon's day were usually flat. They were also a place where people would sit and share, particularly in the evenings. So, apathy and laziness may seem to be little things. The consequence can be huge. A little leak may not seem to be much. But it can lead to fallen in roof.

We are then called to diligence in a world where everything tends to fade, fail and fall. Nothing in this world is forever. Everything in this world will decay. So, wise people who want to be pleasing to God apply themselves to maintaining what God has given them. We do not live in a maintenance free world.

Frivolity in Fallen World (v. 19)

This is an observation about the nature of life. It is a proverb. But it also carries with it a warning about our attitudes. Notice that life is being reduced to laughter, fun and

happiness. These things tend to bring those things. But if we think that bread and wine and money will satisfy in this world, then we are incredibly frivolous and immature.

We are called to a joyful seriousness. Yes, we may and should be glad and joyful in the sharing of bread and wine. Yes, money is a necessary ingredient in this world as designed by God. But none of these things are ultimate. They are wonderful when we can enjoy them. But they are passing and transitory. Even the bread and wine as symbols of our Lord's death and our union with Him and with each other will last in this world under the sun. One day all these symbols of our redemption will be lifted up with One who is their reality.

Rebellion in Hidden Words (v. 20)

Verse 20 reflects a proverb, a saying that exists in many languages and cultures. "Be careful what you say; you don't know who is listening." But this is more than a warning about guarded thoughts and hidden words. This is a warning that rebellion against authority has a way of becoming public.

Submission is hard in this world. It is so easy to whisper rebellious words in our hearts. It is easy to share rebellious words to others in secret. But rebellion is sin against God. Satan whispered in his own heart before he rose up in public rebellion. A lack of submission begins first in the inner words of our heart. It spreads through quiet words to others. But it usually is uncovered by God in the situations He allows or brings.

A lack of submission often spreads like small sparks ignite a forest fire. Be careful. Be warned. Be repentant.

Reflect and Respond

Gleaning through these verses we can learn the character and conduct of four groups of people:

Those who are Wise (10:2a, 12a)

Their hearts direct them to do right (10:2a).

Their mouths give forth gracious words (10:12a).

Those who are Foolish (10:2b-3, 6-7, 12b-15)

Their hearts direct them to do evil (10:2b).

The way they walk betrays them as fools (10:3).

They are often (tragically) given great authority (10:6-7).

They are consumed by their own words (10:12b-14).

They are exhausted by even the simplest tasks (10:15).

Those who are in Authority (10:4-5, 16-17, 20)

Stay calm, and don't quit if your boss is angry with you (10:4).

Woe to the land whose king is a child (10:16).

Happy is the land whose king is a nobleman (10:17).

Don't make light of a king, even in your thoughts (10:20).

Those who are Lazy (10:18)

He lets the roof leak and the rafters rot.

Beloved, we must be realistic. We do not live in a perfect world with perfect people. This is true in the world. This is true in the church. Nowhere now is the garden of Eden. The new creation has begun in us through the new birth. But we are still in the old. This is a time under the sun where the old and new overlap. For the glory of God and good of each of us, be pleasing to God. Be gracious to people Because a little folly will spoil the best, live with great wisdom.

Notes