

ECCLESIASTES 10 PURSUING WISDOM IN VARIOUS FORMS

At the close of the preceding chapter, we observed wisdom and folly being contrasted with each other; and this contrast is still pursued throughout the chapter now before us. In a series of proverbial utterances, the royal Preacher points out the evils of folly and the advantages of wisdom. He begins with these words: “Dead flies cause the ointment of the perfumer to send forth a stinking savour; so doth a little folly outweigh wisdom and honour.” The fragrance of precious ointment was highly valued in Solomon’s day, and he has already said that “a good name is better than precious ointment.” But just as a few “dead flies” lying in such ointment would turn its fragrance into a disagreeable odor; so also, even a little folly is sometimes sufficient to outweigh much “wisdom and honour.” A single act of indiscretion committed by a wise man will sometimes greatly lessen the influence of his wisdom; a single element of foolish weakness in the character of a person who is otherwise strong may rob him of much power for good. The same is also true of the general community. Folly is a corrupting influence, working subtly and disastrously in society; and it often exercises a power that is entirely disproportionate to the importance of the people who wield it. The lesson that is here implied, of course, is that since even “a little folly” can be so potent for evil, it is of the utmost importance that we should avoid it entirely. We must seek to lessen its contaminating influence by cultivating in ourselves and others a generous and beneficent wisdom. In other words, we must try to keep the flies from finding their way into the fragrant ointment.

In proverbial style, the Preacher illustrates the necessity of wisdom, the superiority of wisdom over mere brute force, and the desirableness of applying wisdom in the right way and of using it at the right time. He speaks of four actions that involved a certain degree of risk to those who undertook them, such as digging ditches, breaking through boundaries, moving stones, and chopping wood. And the implication is that the risk of injury is even greater in the corresponding moral realm than in the physical. For example, a man who dug a pit and then covered it over, in order to trap a wild beast, might accidentally fall into it himself; but let a person dig a pit in order to trap his brother or fellow-man, and he is even more likely to suffer. A wise man will do his best to avoid all the terrible risks which are involved in wicked thoughts, words, and deeds.

Solomon gives two more proverbial illustrations which seem to point to the importance of applying wisdom in the right way, and at the right time. If a man is engaged in cutting down trees, and he is working with a blunt axe, then

Outline of the chapter:

- ❖ *Solomon recommends wisdom to persons in subordinate positions, encouraging them to live quietly without disturbing the public peace – verses 1-4, 8-15, 18-20*
- ❖ *He recommends wisdom to rulers and leaders, encouraging them to carefully appoint persons to places of honor and to live in sobriety – verses 5-7, 16-17*

he must increase the force with which he swings it. But it would be much better for him to exercise wisdom and sharpen the edge of his tool! Wisdom is better than mere force; but even where force must be used, wisdom is profitable to direct that force in the right way. And wisdom, rightly applied, may often save a man much expenditure of energy. As for the second proverb, speaking of a person who supposedly possesses the powers of a “snakecharmer,” he would act foolishly if he allowed the venomous creature to bite him without putting forth any endeavor to charm it; he might as well be without his alleged powers if he does not use them at the right time. Similarly, amidst the difficult and dangerous tasks of life – when a man is liable to be bitten by some “serpent” in an “old fence” – it is good for him to execute such tasks with the caution and tact which will help to shield himself from injury. Even wisdom may lose much of its practical value if it is not employed at *the right time*.

The Preacher also spends some time in this chapter to speak of the national dangers of folly, and the evils which result to a community when its leaders are living with childish thoughtlessness and selfish frivolity. When the rulers of a land give themselves industriously to the tasks of government; and when they are not self-centered devotees of luxury, but men whose lives are guided by manly temperance and wise self-control – then such a country is likely to prosper! But it is a sorry situation for a nation when its leaders spend their days in foolish idleness and debauchery. Such effeminate rulers live only for revelry and mirth. They care for nothing else, as long as their money lasts; for their money enables them to gratify all their carnal lusts. And this very money, perhaps, they have extorted largely from their oppressed and down-trodden people. A land thus governed by foolish tyrants is in a wretched condition indeed; the framework of the government becomes dilapidated, and the rain begins to drop through the roof (so to speak). And yet in those days especially, it was dangerous to criticize these foolish and slothful rulers; for such selfish tyranny was often associated with a widespread system of espionage, which made silence and patience the most prudent course. Sometimes, injustice is best met by silence. A wise man may sometimes show his wisdom by patiently enduring even the misrule of foolish and wicked persons.

The practical lesson of this whole chapter is that we should earnestly pursue wisdom in its various forms. But above all, let us pray for grace to receive into our hearts that “wisdom which cometh down from above!” Let us seek to be “wise unto salvation!” Let us seek Jesus, so that no matter what our ignorance may be in other matters, we may at least be wise enough to know the way to that “city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God!”

Lord, we beseech You to fill our minds with that true Wisdom which comes down from heaven – that Wisdom which is more than knowledge alone. Show us Jesus, so that we may be wise unto salvation and know the path to the Celestial City! Amen.