

Gaining Wisdom is No Guarantee of Success

📖 Ecclesiastes 9:11-10:1

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📅 March 21, 2018

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We return to Qoheleth, the teacher, or as it is popularly known, Ecclesiastes, which comes from the Latin, and probably refers to one who addresses an assembly. But it is really unclear whether Solomon addressed this letter to the assembly of Israel. There are portions that indicate he was addressing his own soul, but it is my opinion that these portions only reveal this in order to communicate to his audience his thought process and how he arrived at his conclusions. There are also interesting portions that indicate he was addressing the Gentile nations, as sort of a final testimony after his departure into living like the Gentile nations. And in this case, which I think is provocative, his message is meant to go out to the world and be a light to all nations, which was the stewardship responsibility of Israel in the OT dispensation. In any case, God the Holy Spirit has used Solomon's period of carnality as a teaching device, to warn us how not to live, and thereby how to live. So while the book has been referred to as the most pessimistic book in the Bible, it is easy to see that an optimistic spin is to be seen by the reader so that in the final analysis we come away with a remarkable picture about how to live and how to enjoy life under the sun by having a perspective that goes beyond the sun.

We are in chapter 9, and Solomon is making more observations. This man observed and observed and observed. One thing he observed is the limitations of wisdom. Wisdom is good and valuable, but it can't solve every problem. Mainly, it can't look into the eternal plan and purpose of God and understand why God sends us adversity or prosperity and which He is going to send us next. From our vantage point, anything can happen, although, from His vantage point, His plan is what will happen. So because wisdom is limited in not being able to understand everything that happens in our lives and we can't use wisdom to see the future, in 9:1-10 he has an initial knee-jerk reaction to gaining wisdom, but then he slows down and thinks it through more carefully.

In 9:1 he reflected on the limitations of wisdom and concluded that the righteous and the wise are in the sovereign plan of God, so that their circumstances are determined by God. And man does not know what is coming next, whether it will be what man considers the love of God or the hate of God. When good things happen it is thought that God is shining on me, God is loving me, and when bad things happen that God hates me. This is not true, of course, but that is the way men apprehend things. But no one knows what is coming next because the sovereign plan of God is hidden from man's side, inaccessible to wisdom. So then in 9:2, everyone

shares the same fate, we all go to the grave, so what advantage does being righteous or gaining wisdom give to a man? There seems to be no ultimate advantage seeing that we all go to death. 9:3 only belabors this point and makes clear that all men, whether young or old, are basically foolish and then they die. This is a pessimistic outlook, but I think a knee jerk reaction of Solomon to the limitations of gaining wisdom.

In 9:4-6 he thought more carefully and concluded that there is an advantage to being alive over being dead. Surely, he says, a live dog is better than a dead lion. For the people of the ancient world the dog was a despised animal while the lion was an honored animal. But if the dog was alive, it had it better than a dead lion. At least those who are alive have hope for the future, hope of some good thing in life. The dead have no hope of that. In 9:5, the living know they will die, they have that prospect, and live life accordingly, making the most of the days, but the dead do not know that any longer, since they have already tasted death and have no prospect of making the most of the days. As Solomon explains, they no longer have a reward. This is a temporal reward, reward in this life for one's doings. And even their memory is forgotten. The living go on with life. They sometimes remember those who died, but after two or three generations no one remembers them. All are forgotten. Speaking of the dead in 9:6, "Indeed their love, their hate, and their zeal have perished, their passions in life are no more, and they have no share in what takes place under the sun. They have no say in the matters that transpire. They have already come and gone. So the one who lives has it better than the one who is dead, because in Solomon's point of view, at least the one who is alive still has time to do things in this world, express himself and enjoy reward for his tasks. He does not go beyond time. He does not consider the joy that may be beyond the sun. That is not Solomon's point. But it is this point that causes a tension in us who are aging or near death. We, on one hand, want to stay in this world, and on the other want to go on to the next world. We tend to fight until we give in and death takes us. But it is a noble fight. I do not think we should give up that fight. And as long as we are here we can work for eternity. But again, that is not Solomon's point. His point is that as long as you are alive you can enjoy life here, but once you are gone you can't come back.

In 9:7-10 he instructs us on how to live wisely while still alive. This is the most complete section where he tells us how to live wisely. In 9:7, eat in happiness, drink wine with cheer, these are the reward of God and evidence that He has already approved of your labor. It's no problem to enjoy those things in moderation. In 9:8 he's saying wear clean clothes and take care of your hygiene. They lived in a dry climate and oil was plentiful, so they used it to maintain good hygiene. That is to be enjoyed, we can relax and enjoy taking care of ourselves in the basic necessities of life. In 9:9 he goes to the second divine institution of marriage, enjoy life with the love of your life, your fleeting life, because you don't have much time to enjoy the love of your life. So take each day as a gift of God. This is your reward in life and because of your toil under the sun. And in 9:10, whatever you do, your hobbies, your labor, do it with all your might, do it with planning, do it with knowledge, do it with skill, because when you die, you have no more opportunity to do these things and no more opportunity for reward. Solomon wants us to enjoy life. Of course, we can go further, we know more in the NT, and what we know is that we do all these things with God at the center. We don't just eat, drink and be merry, that could be hedonism, and we don't

just keep good hygiene for good hygiene's sake, we do these things with God at the center and for the glory of God and that is how we get the most joy out of life.

We transition today into something else Solomon saw, and I think this grows out of verse 10. The verses are difficult, as is often the case in Ecclesiastes. There are issues in the Hebrew and the argument itself is difficult to follow. When I have encountered this I have always tried to take the most contextual interpretation. The first rule of hermeneutics is "context, context, context." As we say, context is king. So, the direction our section speaks of tonight is controlled by verse 10. The word at the beginning of verse 11 indicates this. He says **I again saw**, which in the Hebrew means "I looked again," meaning I looked again at verse 10, the instruction to do whatever we do with all our might. He looked again at that, because the logical conclusion of that is that if you do it with all your might you'll be successful. And yet, that's not what Solomon found. He actually found that even if you do everything with all your might you might not find success. Verse 11, **I again saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift and the battle is not to the warriors, and neither is bread to the wise nor wealth to the discerning nor favor to men of ability; for time and chance overtake them all.** By referring to the **race is not to the swift**, he did not mean that the swiftest runner didn't ever win the race. He simply meant that he doesn't always win the race. Sometimes a slower runner wins the race. By referring to **the battle is not to the warriors**, he did not mean that the battle is never won by the strongest warriors, only that it is not always won by the strongest warriors. But sometimes it is won by the weaker warriors. He now applies this to the wise. Just because you are wise and discerning, and a man of ability does not mean that you will have **bread**, food on the table, **wealth**, great riches, or **favor** among men. As Glenn said in the Bible Knowledge Commentary. "As a **race** is not always won by the swiftest runner, or a victory in a **battle** always won by the mightiest soldiers, so also the wise do not always earn a living (i.e., gain **food**, lit., "bread"), get rich, or acquire a great reputation (gain **favor**)."¹

The reason he sets forth in the NASB is **for time and chance overtake them all.** The appearance of **chance** disturbs most Christians, since we don't believe in **chance**. But the Hebrew word here does not mean **chance** in the sense of modern English, as some kind of luck or random event. Wiersbe said, "The word "chance" simply means occurrence or event."² It is looking at life from the human standpoint. And consistent with what Solomon has said before, we can't look ahead and see what will happen next. But whatever happens next can affect history so that even though you do something with all your might, even if you gain great wisdom, this does not mean you will be successful, and in some cases someone who is a dimwit will be successful. This is what Solomon observed.

Now this has a great deal of repercussions for our thinking about who is really the best at something; some sport, some business, some art, some skill. There are many people who are better at what they do and yet are not as well-known as those who are. So just because they are well-known in an area and successful does not mean that they are the best. I applied this directly to my profession, Bible-teaching. You can think of people like John MacArthur who has a worldwide ministry or someone in history like Augustine, who is probably the most

widely known theologian in the world, and yet both of these men have brought some very bad ideas into the Church. MacArthur is listened to daily by probably more than 30,000 people, and yet he teaches Lordship or Mastery Salvation, the idea that there are different kinds of faith and that only if you have real or saving faith, a faith that includes life change and commitment of life and obedience, are you really saved. Here is the world's most popular and successful pastors and he is teaching a false gospel. But people tend to think that because he is so popular and successful he must be one of the best! Augustine is more well-known than any theologian in history, and yet he probably brought more heresy into Christianity than any other theologian. I can think of many, but just think of the irony of this; Augustine is the champion of both Roman Catholicism and Reformed Calvinism. You wonder how can that be. But when you look at their soteriology, though differing in aspects, they both end up saying this; you can have no assurance of salvation in this life. That is a doctrine of both Reformed Calvinism and Roman Catholicism. So similar is their doctrine on this point that if I took quotes from each side and placed them side by side, you couldn't tell which was written by a Roman Catholic and which was written by a Reformed Calvinist. And by the way, we could do the same with Arminian. They also reject assurance of salvation and their quotes have also been placed among them and they are indecipherable.³ Yet the Scriptures attest that we can know we have eternal life. And yet Augustine is seen as immensely popular and successful the world over. But in verse 11 Solomon is saying that just because you work hard at whatever you do, it does not mean you will be successful. There will always be men who are worse that find success. And in a few verses, he will give us an illustration.

In 9:12 Solomon observed this, **Moreover, man does not know his time: like fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them.** Now here we see clearly that the word **chance** at the end of verse 10 did not mean happenstance, because the word **his time**, is the word for "appointed time," that is, a time appointed in the sovereign plan of God, and this is what Solomon has been saying all along, as far back as chapter 3. There is a sovereign plan of God that men find themselves in. By sovereign plan of God, we mean that God determines the circumstances in which men find themselves. We do not mean that God determines man's response to the circumstances. The sovereignty of God organizes the circumstances that encircle men, and men are responsible to respond to those circumstances correctly.

He then compares man not knowing the appointed times or circumstances of his life to that of a fish and a bird. **Like a fish caught in a treacherous net and birds trapped in a snare, so the sons of men are ensnared at an evil time when it suddenly falls on them.** When it uses the comparison with **a fish**, it is not that the **net** is **treacherous**, but that to a fish that is **caught** it is **treacherous**. It stopped short the full potential of the fish. And as **birds trapped in a snare**. The snare is evil to **birds** because it limits their full potential. It is the same way with **the sons of men** who do whatever they do with all their might and without warning, **suddenly** circumstances in the sovereign plan of God surround them and render their hard work and abilities fruitless.

Now to give us an example, he spends verses 13-16 describing a small city under siege, a poor wise man and a verbose king. In 9:13 he says, **Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me.** Now the Hebrew translated **it impressed me**, is simply "it was great to me," but in what sense it was great to him is unclear at first. Was it great in its impression on him or was it great in its burden on him? In what sense was it great to him? Well, it seems from the example that it was simply a great example of what he has been explaining in vv 11-12, and in particular, with wisdom.

Let's read the story starting in verse 14. **There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it and constructed large siegeworks against it. ¹⁵But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man. ¹⁶So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded.** So here we have a **small city** and only a **few men in** the city, and a foreign **king came to** the city, **surrounded it and** set up **large** battlements **against it**. So, the small city and its inhabitants were in distress and in need of deliverance. But in verse 15, the small city was fortunate because **there was found in it a poor wise man**. So, here's a man who had wisdom, but he was also poor. So, this is a man who fits the bill of verse 11 who worked hard to gain wisdom and who had discernment and who had ability, and yet he was not rich, as one might expect. Nevertheless, he had wisdom and he devised an excellent plan and **delivered the city**. Now the word translated **delivered** in the Hebrew can mean "might have delivered," and some commentators point to this and go a different route in their exposition. Their idea is that he had a plan that would have delivered the city but the people didn't listen to the poor wise man and so their city came to destruction. Later in the verse where it says "Yet no one remembered that poor man" they say the word "remembered" should be translated "listened."⁴ And they insist that the teaching of Solomon in this section is that very few people heed wisdom. And while that might be true, it doesn't fit the context as well as the route I am taking. For me the teaching arises out of verses 10 and 11, that Solomon said a man ought to do whatever he does with all his might and yet when he looked at this again, he came back and said, "Now just because you do it with all your might, don't think that guarantees success, because there is always the plan of God and you don't know what is coming next. And it could be bad." So when I look at the story in verse 15, I think the **poor wise man** actually **delivered the city by his wisdom**. But what you would expect if a man did such a thing is that he would gain notoriety and fame and fortune. But the verse concludes saying, **Yet no one remembered that poor man**. There are a great many people in history who did great things and are not **remembered**. This man didn't have fame and fortune in his future, that wasn't the plan of God for him.

Now from this example Solomon concluded in 9:16, **So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength."** Why did he say that? Because the **poor wise man's** wisdom was able to deliver the city from an army of great strength. I take it that's why you want generals with wisdom leading armies; it's the wisdom that is the skill in understanding strategy and tactics and are able to respond quickly, especially in a situation where they are heavily outnumbered and outgunned, so that by wisdom the army is delivered. But the other thing Solomon concluded

in verse 16 is, **But the wisdom of the poor man is despised and his words are not heeded.** This is the main reason I have some reticence in following my interpretation, because it sounds like these words support the idea that the city did not follow the wise man's words and the city was not delivered. But it might be that Solomon simply means that the poor man was **despised** and **his words not heeded** in the sense that even though his words delivered the city, he was not elevated in honor as he should have been and his wisdom regarding what to do next was not listened to. So, he continued to be **poor** and disregarded. His wisdom did not win the day, as verse 11 originally suggested.

9:17-10:1 seems to confirm this, and this is Solomon's conclusion of the illustration. **The words of the wise heard in quietness are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.** The words of a wise man offered in quietness, or secret, would be the poor wise man's counsel offered to key people of the city when they were in distress, words that gave deliverance. His words **are better than the shouting words of a ruler among fools.** The king may have been shouting out orders about what to do to salvage the city, but they did not give the deliverance. It was wisdom heard quietly that was better than wild shouting of orders. Fortunately, on this occasion the people listened to the poor wise man, but in most situations who do people listen to? They listen to the loud shouting of a ruler. The main reason they do this is they are fools. They do not take the time to stop and listen and think. Many a nation has followed the loud verbose claims of a tyrant when they should have considered the calm, thoughtful words of a wise man. The illustration of a small city being delivered by the words of a wise man are evidence that such words are superior. How much more then should we listen to wisdom in quiet than all the noise of the politicians and talking heads on TV?

In verse 18 he continues the comparison, **Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. Wisdom is better than weapons of war** in the sense that the wise man's strategy delivered them from **weapons of war**. There is more than one way to wage a war and win. **But** in the aftermath, **one sinner**, presumably the loud obnoxious king, **destroyed much good**. The king didn't apply wisdom and much of what was gained through the wise man's deliverance was lost. As Wright in the *Expositors Bible Commentary* said, "Yet, though the poor man's wisdom proved more effective than the king's armies, some loud-mouthed counselor was afterwards allowed to undo much of the good that had been gained (v. 18)."⁵ By comparison, **Dead flies make a perfumers oil stink, so a little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor.** The Hebrew translated **dead flies** can be taken as plural or singular. Wallace said, "*Heb* 'flies of death.'" The plural form of "flies" (זְבוּבִים, *zévuvim*) may be taken as a plural of number ("dead flies") or a distributive plural referring to one little fly ("one dead fly"). The singular form of the following verb and the parallelism support the latter: "one little fly ... so a little folly."⁶ It only took one fly to spoil **a perfumers oil**. This illustrates another truth. That a **little foolishness is weightier than wisdom and honor**. What this means is that a little foolishness can easily destroy all the efforts of wisdom. Scripture repeatedly shows that one person blew everything that was good. Wiersbe said, "One sinner [the loud ruler] destroys much good" (v. 18, NKJV) is a truth that is illustrated throughout the whole of Scripture, starting with Adam and his disobedience to God (Gen. 3; Rom. 5). Achan sinned and brought

defeat on the army of Israel (Joshua 7). David's sin brought trouble to Israel (2 Sam. 24), and the revolt of Absalom led the nation into a civil war (2 Sam. 15ff).⁷ The truth is plain. It takes much effort to gain wisdom and to get people to listen to it and follow it. And when they do there are fantastic results. However, it only takes one fool to ruin all those results. So, the lesson is that even if you work hard to get wisdom, it does not guarantee success.

In conclusion, in 9:11-12 Solomon is building off of verse 10, the idea that whatever you do you should do with all your might. However, in verse 11 he looked at this again and noticed that success was not always to the one who worked the hardest. Some win the race that are not the swiftest, some win the war that are not the strongest, so also the wise who have discernment and ability should have food on the table, wealth and favor among men, but this is not always so. His explanation is that time and occurrences happen to us all. In verse 12, we do not know the appointed times which are in the sovereign plan of God. So, they are like fish caught unexpectedly in a net or birds trapped in a snare, they are going along just fine and suddenly misfortune falls on them. In verses 13-16 Solomon illustrates. In verse 13 there was a great example he set out to tell. In verse 14 there was a small city with just a few men and a great king and his armies came and surrounded it and built up battlements against it. In verse 15 there was a poor wise man and he had the best plan and he delivered the city by his wisdom. But afterward no one remembered the poor man. So, in verse 16, Solomon said, wisdom is better than strength. But it's not true that in every case wisdom results in success, because afterward the poor man was still despised and his words were not heeded. Yet, verse 17, the words of the wise listened to in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. So, in verse 18, while wisdom is better than weapons of war, one sinner, the king, destroyed much good that had come from the wise man. In 10:1 he illustrates how a little foolishness can destroy something that took a long time to make. A dead fly in a perfumer's ointment ruins it. So, foolishness can easily destroy the efforts of wisdom.

All this can be depressing. However, there are some important things to learn from this. First, 9:11-12 show that success in this life is not always guaranteed if you do whatever you do with all your might. But remember, that is only in this life and success is not ultimately determined in this life by other men, but at the judgment, by God. There, true success is granted to all believers who do all they do with all their might and they will be rewarded accordingly. Second, 9:13-16 shows that you can accomplish a lot of good in this world with wisdom, and you may be forgotten and not be recognized for your contribution. But again, that is just in this world. At the judgment you will not be forgotten and you will be rewarded by God. Third, 9:17-10:1 show that a little foolishness can destroy the long sought after results of wisdom in this life. However, depressing as that may sound, the contribution of wisdom will not be forgotten either. God will reward it. Solomon did not look beyond the sun in this passage. As verse 13 says, he viewed this from under the sun. But when we look beyond the sun, there is an optimism in that there is more to this life than this life, there is the afterlife and God will not forget the wisdom we have gained and the success in His eyes that we have achieved.

¹ Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1000.

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 113.

³ See Thomas Stegall, *Must Faith Endure for Salvation to Be Sure?* pp 44-50,

⁴ E.g. NET Bible.

⁵ J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 1184.

⁶ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005).

⁷ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Satisfied*, "Be" Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 114.