

Ecc 9:13-11:6 “In the Place Where the Tree Falls: Power and Wealth Under the Sun” Sept 14, 2014

*In the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.*

That’s a pretty good way of summarizing what Ecclesiastes is saying about life.  
Stuff happens.

In the Redwood forests of California,  
there are fallen trees that have been there for hundreds of years.  
When the trunk is thirty feet in diameter – and two hundred feet long –  
and when the bark is fire resistant –  
a fallen tree can survive dozens of fires and hundreds of years.

In the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.

The pattern of Ecclesiastes is notoriously difficult to ascertain.

Every time that you think you see the pattern,  
you discover something that doesn’t quite fit!  
Obviously, there is this back-and-forth between “everything is vanity”  
and “enjoy life under the sun!”

But it’s not a neat and simple structure.

Proverbs 1-9 has a neat and simple structure.

Each section opens with the words “my son” –  
and then the major divisions are marked by the plural “O sons.”  
And the book of Proverbs has a neat and simple point:  
“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.”  
Love wisdom and cling to her – flee from Folly and stay away from her.

Ecclesiastes is written to complicate Proverbs 1-9.

Life isn’t quite that neat and simple.  
What do you do *when you can’t find Wisdom!*?  
And all you can find is Folly?  
I find the woman who is a snare (Folly in Proverbs 9),  
but I cannot find Wisdom.

And so, not surprisingly, the literary structure of Ecclesiastes falls apart  
precisely where the Preacher fails in his search for Wisdom.

Notice what is happening here:  
the Preacher has failed to find Wisdom.

But he can’t stop looking for her!

He can't live as a jaded cynic.  
As Augustine put it, "You have made us for yourself,  
and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

And of course, our author uses the Preacher to remind us  
that even when you don't know – even when you don't understand *why* –  
all you can do is keep seeking for wisdom!

Jesus said, "Seek and you will find."  
He didn't say, "Seek and you will find *five minutes later*"!  
Ask and it will be given to you.  
Seek and you will find.  
Knock and the door will be opened to you.

But, Pastor, I've been knocking for 20 years!  
Knock, and it *will be opened*.  
Seek and *you will find*.  
Are you willing to seek for another 50 years?

"You do not know the work of God who makes everything."

I've entitled this sermon, "In the place where the tree falls: power and wealth under the sun,"  
because while the structure of this passage is all over the map,  
there is a recurring theme of what you might call "political theology."

We're not just talking about individual ethics here.  
The Preacher is speaking to the ruling class in Jerusalem.

The sections that I've numbered with 1, 2, and 3, keep bringing this recurring theme back  
while the sections lettered a, b, and c, interject various "wise sayings"  
that aren't always clearly related.  
But by now, we should realize that our crazy uncle isn't quite as crazy as he sounds.

## **1. Wisdom Under the Sun: the Poor Man and the City (9:13-18)**

Listen carefully to verses 13-16:

<sup>13</sup> *I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me.* <sup>14</sup> *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.* <sup>15</sup> *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.* <sup>16</sup> *But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.*

Every culture has its story of the poor wise man (or woman)  
who rescued the city by his wise counsel.  
And it sounds *at first* like the Preacher is celebrating the great triumph of wisdom over strength!

And he is – sort of.

Yet no one remembered that poor man.  
The poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.

Oh, sure, they listened – just long enough to save the city!  
But then they ignored and despised the poor man again.

Aargh!

Will you not let us have one happy story?  
One “feel good” story!?

No.

The Preacher will not let you “feel good” about humanity.  
Everything has been contaminated by sin.  
Everyone dies.  
Everything is vanity.

Yes, “I say that wisdom is better than might” –  
but while wisdom may triumph over might,  
it has no chance against pettiness!

The foreign king was chased away by the poor man's wisdom.  
But the local rulers don't like being upstaged by the poor man.

As verses 17-18 put it:

<sup>17</sup> *The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools.*

<sup>18</sup> *Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.*

Yes, wisdom is better – but wisdom requires teamwork!

All the wisdom in the world can be overturned by one person who doesn't get it.

If your football team has ten men who are smart and play really well together –  
you are going to have a losing season.

Because if that eleventh guy is not on the same page with the other ten,  
then there will always be a hole in your defense.

“One sinner destroys much good.”

And so perhaps the following “wise sayings” make sense in that light:

**a. “A Fly in the Ointment” and Other Wise Sayings (10:1-4)**

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

Undoubtedly, wisdom is *better*.  
But folly is heavier.

Or – actually – “more precious”!

The Hebrew word here does not mean “weight” but *value*.

A little folly is more valuable than wisdom and honor!

What does he mean?

It’s not that folly is *better* – but just as these little insignificant flies  
can render a whole batch of costly ointment worthless –  
so also a little folly can be far more expensive than wisdom and honor!

A little folly on Judas’s part resulted in the most expensive transaction ever!  
The life of the Son of God.

It costs so much to put wisdom into practice.

You have to study, and learn, and train, and do –  
and all it takes is one moment of folly to undo a whole life of wisdom!

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

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

Think of how Jesus says in Matthew 25 that he will place the sheep at his right,  
and the goats at his left.  
The right hand is the place of honor.

And the wise man’s heart inclines him to the right.

In some Semitic cultures to this day you “eat with your right, wipe with your left”  
so it is not surprising to hear that the fool’s heart inclines to the left!

The fool is headed in the opposite direction from the wise!

Verse 4 then gives an example:

<sup>4</sup> *If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place,  
for calmness<sup>[d]</sup> will lay great offenses to rest.*

There are moments when you should go neither to the right nor to the left –  
but just stand still!  
Do not leave your place.

You know how this works!  
When your boss is upset with you, will it help if you start yelling back at him?

So the first point focuses on “wisdom under the sun”  
and how folly has a tendency to override wisdom.

In verses 5-7 we focus on folly – and “evil under the sun”  
and then the “wise sayings” that follow show how folly tends to destroy itself –  
resulting in the triumph of wisdom!

## **2. Evil Under the Sun: A Kingdom Upside Down (10:5-7)**

<sup>5</sup> *There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler:*  
<sup>6</sup> *folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place.* <sup>7</sup> *I have seen slaves on horses,*  
*and princes walking on the ground like slaves.*

And notice that the Preacher starts again with “observation” –  
“I have seen under the sun”...

Folly is set in many high places.  
Let me start by saying that the word “high places” is the word used in Proverbs 9,  
when it speaks of Wisdom and Folly as occupying the “highest places” in the city.  
So if folly is set in many high places *by the ruler* –  
this will turn a kingdom upside down.

And again we have the emphasis on observation in verse 7:  
“I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves.”

But notice that the Preacher does not contrast rich and poor, strong and weak, wise and foolish.

Rather, he contrasts the rich vs. folly – the prince vs. the slave.  
Can you think of a slave on a horse? Led by a prince on foot?

Haman leading Mordecai through the streets of Susa?  
(incidentally, one Hebrew order of the OT has Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, *Esther*!)

When Haman the prince led Mordecai the Jew through the streets of Susa,  
the kingdom was truly turned upside down!

You might wish to quibble with me –  
after all, the Preacher says that this is an *evil* that he has seen under the sun! –  
but just as the Preacher subverts all our “happy stories” –  
I would suggest that the Preacher also subverts our “sad stories.”

When the poor man saved the city by his wisdom,  
he was ignored.  
And when the ruler erroneously set folly in the high places  
that too backfired!

You see, when you observe life under the sun,  
you realize that *everything* goes wrong!  
*Even folly!*

**b. “A Fool Multiplies Words” and Other Wise Sayings (10:8-15)**

- <sup>8</sup> *He who digs a pit will fall into it,  
and a serpent will bite him who breaks through a wall.*
- <sup>9</sup> *He who quarries stones is hurt by them,  
and he who splits logs is endangered by them.*
- <sup>10</sup> *If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge,  
he must use more strength,  
but wisdom helps one to succeed.<sup>[e]</sup>*
- <sup>11</sup> *If the serpent bites before it is charmed,  
there is no advantage to the charmer.*

Everything can go wrong.  
It’s true that a sharp ax will split logs better than a blunt ax.  
But a sharper ax might also have lethal consequences if the ax slips!

(I suspect that Murphy’s law was formulated by someone very much like the Preacher!)

- <sup>12</sup> *The words of a wise man's mouth win him favor,<sup>[f]</sup>  
but the lips of a fool consume him.*
- <sup>13</sup> *The beginning of the words of his mouth is foolishness,  
and the end of his talk is evil madness.*
- <sup>14</sup> *A fool multiplies words,  
though no man knows what is to be,  
and who can tell him what will be after him?*
- <sup>15</sup> *The toil of a fool wearies him,  
for he does not know the way to the city.*

The sayings of verses 8-15 have a cumulative effect:  
if wisdom can go astray – how much more will folly go astray!  
If even the “feel good” stories fall apart,  
how much more will folly collapse under its own weight!

And the result is that “the toil of a fool wearies him, for he does not know the way to the city.”  
Narrow is the way that leads to life, and few are they who find it.  
Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.

No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

So we saw at first that wisdom falls short – and folly triumphs over wisdom.  
But then we see that if wisdom fails, how much more will folly fall short!

Our third section then contrasts folly and wealth.

### **3. “Money Answers Everything” – Folly vs. Wealth (10:16-20)**

<sup>16</sup> *Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child,  
and your princes feast in the morning!*  
<sup>17</sup> *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!*

When do you feast?

If you start your feasting in the morning,  
then you’ll never get around to the day’s work!  
The “proper time” for feasting is not so much a time of day  
as it is a situation in life!

“For strength, and not for drunkenness”

Notice the contrast in verse 18:

<sup>18</sup> *Through sloth the roof sinks in,  
and through indolence the house leaks.*

This is just good, old-fashioned wisdom.

Regular maintenance is essential for keeping your house together!

That’s not just a statement about the building you live in.

The church, after all, is the house of God.

The elders are called to do “regular maintenance” –  
that just as the rulers of Israel were to care for the household of God  
in the OT,  
so also the elders of the church should care for the people of God today.

<sup>19</sup> *Bread is made for laughter,  
and wine gladdens life,*

Exactly!

We see this in the Lord’s Supper – as we partake of the bread and the wine,  
rejoicing before the Lord...

*and money answers everything.*

What?!!

Well, if you think about it, it *does*.

Do you lack bread?

If you have money, you can buy it.

Do you lack wine?

If you have money, you can buy it.

Do you need to repair your roof?

If you have money, you can hire it out.

If you have enough money, you can pretty much take care of all your needs.

Oh, except one.

If you curse the king, there's not enough money on earth to get out of that hole!

<sup>20</sup> *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.*

Be careful what you say about others!

The Preacher is warning especially against speaking against the rich and powerful,  
but the principle carries over to everyone!

If you say something negative about someone else,  
odds are, it will get back to them!

Verses 16-20 certainly *look like* they are saying  
that we should focus on making money  
and keeping the rich and powerful on our good side.

I remember a conversation in college,  
where an older man told me that the way to get ahead in life  
was to stay close to influential people.

The Preacher, however, takes a different approach:

**c. “Cast Your Bread Upon the Waters” – and Other Wise Sayings (11:1-4)**

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

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

Some people think that the Preacher is encouraging diversified investments –  
and that “cast your bread upon the waters” refers to overseas trading.



But I don't think that the Preacher is turning aside so quickly from his theme.  
Do not curse the king – nor in your bedroom curse the rich.

Cast your bread upon the waters.

What is bread for?

Laughter.  
Feasting.

What should you do with your bread?

Distribute it widely.  
Give a portion to seven, or even to eight.

Don't just patronize the wealthy and powerful.

“for you know not what disaster may happen on earth”!

The Preacher had just said back in 9:11

“The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise,  
nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge,  
but time and chance happen to them all.”

Cast your bread upon the waters.

Some say that it's about charity – giving to the poor.  
Others say that it's about investment and trade.

I would suggest that it's about all of the above *and more*.

It's about how you break bread.  
It's about how you use your house.

If you put all your eggs in one basket –

then you are not casting your bread upon the waters!

The Preacher is saying *Don't be so fixated on the rich and powerful*  
that you fail to love the weak and lowly.

After all, the only thing that we know from our investigation of life under the sun  
is that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.

Verses 3-4 warn us not to be too certain of our interpretation of the “signs”:

<sup>3</sup> *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.*

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

Don't try to figure everything out!

Just go about your business.

If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth.

If a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.

What has God put in front of you to do?

Do that.

“But what about this... What if that...”

NO!!

He who observes the wind will not sow.

Was Jesus thinking of this when he said,

“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound,

but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)?

**Conclusion: Admit Your Ignorance! (11:5-6)**

<sup>5</sup> *As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb<sup>[g]</sup> of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.*

The same word “ruach” – translated “wind” in verse 4 – is used again in verse 5 –

“the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child.”

Centuries before Jesus said this to Nicodemus,

the Preacher had said it to Israel.

Though, quite frankly, the Preacher appears to be much more in the seat of Nicodemus!

He does not yet understand what it means, “You must be born again!”

But what he *knows* is that he does not know!

Socrates said that the reason why the gods had declared him the wisest man in the world was because Socrates was the only man who admitted that he knew nothing!

Well, the Preacher got there first!

“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.”

<sup>6</sup> *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.*

Don't be fixated on wealth –

don't worry about what will prosper –

just do the things that God puts in front of you to do.