

Eccl. 9:13-10:15, Wisdom and Folly
July 2, 1988
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A. Outline of the rest of the book

1. 8:16-11:6, A Study of Wisdom and Labor
 - a) 8:16-9:12, the Impotence of Man in Wisdom and Labor
 - b) 9:13-11:6, Encouragement to work anyway.

Thus, the previous conclusion does not lead to idleness, but to a proper attitude toward our work.

- 1) 9:13-10:15, The Value of Wisdom (Today's lesson)
 - a> A story about what wisdom can and can't do.
 - b> General comparison of wisdom and folly.
 - c> Effects of folly in leadership.
 - d> Effects of folly in labor.
 - e> Effects of folly in speech.
- 2) 10:16-11:6, The Value of Labor
2. 11:7-12:8, Enjoy the good and expect the bad.
The general conclusion of the book.
3. 12:9-14, Epilogue.

B. **The Story of the Poor Wise Man, 9:13-18**

Sets forth the strength of wisdom, and at the same time its weakness. It can solve problems, but not always for the one who possesses it!

1. The story, in four acts. (But waw-cons is only used three times in Eccl. anyway, so its absence here is not particularly significant.)
 - a) A small city and its inhabitants. (No verbs--very staccato)
 - b) Attack by a great king.
 - c) Defense by a poor sage.
 - d) Lack of recognition.
2. The lesson, v.16:
 - a) Wisdom really is more powerful and effective than physical might,...
 - b) ...but people are not likely to recognize it.
 - c) Bottom line: only one who is content to live for the benefit of others can enjoy wisdom. There is no guarantee it will serve us directly.

C. **Wisdom and Folly, 9:17-10:3**

Each of the verses in this section traces the interplay between wisdom and folly. Which is stronger? That depends on how we look at it. Wisdom solves practical problems better than folly does, so we could say that wisdom is stronger. But a little folly can undo much wisdom, so folly seems stronger. This is a natural consequence of the fall--the world is predisposed to folly and decay. Thus we have two themes: the practical value of wisdom over folly, and the danger of folly corrupting wisdom.

1. 17: Wisdom > folly.

Move KJV's "are" forward 3 words: "The words of wise men heard in quiet are more [i.e., better] than the cry of him that rules among fools." Note contrasts in the parallelism:

- a) Wise men vs. king of the fools
- b) Quiet vs. cry--wisdom does not need to shout; its value is clear without force and its integrity is only challenged by insistence.

2. 18: Wisdom > Folly; Folly > Wisdom.

This verse sets the two inequalities side by side. Note how "sinner" here takes the place of "fool." In the wisdom literature, folly is sin. The fool is one who denies the existence of God. Not just carelessness or low IQ. That's why the NT forbids us to call our brother a fool. It is a moral challenge, not just an intellectual one.

3. 10:1. Folly > Wisdom.

- a) The picture: flies, attracted by the odor of a jar of choice perfume, get stuck and die. As they rot, the jar's odor turns from pleasant to putrid. The putrifying flies are more powerful than the precious ointment.
- b) The truth: "More weighty than wisdom or honor is a little folly." Like mixing black and white--guess which wins?
- c) Dead flies or deadly flies? Study instances where MaWeT (without article or suffix) is in the genitive after a noun (not a preposition or an active participle).

1) Deadly, bringing death

- a> Dt. 19:6, M\$PT-MWT 21:22; Jer. 26:11,16
- b> Dt. 22:26, X+)-MWT
- c> 1 Sam. 5:11, MHWMT-MWT
- d> 2 Sam. 22:5, M\$BRY-MWT
- e> 2 Sam. 22:6, MQ\$Y-MWT Ps. 18:6, Pr. 13:14; 14:27
- f> Ps. 7:14, KLY-MWT
- g> Ps. 18:5 XBLEY-MWT 116:3
- h> Pr. 16:14 ML)KY-MWT

2) Dead:

- a> 1 Sam. 20:31, BN-MWT "a dead man," a person characterized death, in keeping with the idiomatic use of BN. Not "a dead son." 26:16. 2 Sam. 12:5
- b> 2 Sam. 19:29 (ET 28))N\$Y-MWT "dead men." 1 Kings 2:26
- c> Jer. 18:21 HRGY-MWT

3) Associated with death in some other way

- a> Ps. 9:14, \$(RY-MWT 107:18
- b> Ps. 22:16 (PR-MWT
- c> Ps. 55:5)YMWT-MWT
- d> Job 18:13 BKWR-MWT, Job 38:17
- e> Pr. 7:27 XDRY-MWT
- f> Pr. 14:12 DRKY-MWT 16:25

Lacking any evidence that the Hebrews thought flies brought death, and given the use of MWT in the genitive to mean "dead," conclude for "dead flies," as in the AV.

4. 10:2. Wisdom > Folly.

The heart is the organ of thought and reason. The right hand

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(for most of us) is the skilful hand, while the left is clumsy. Thus the proverb says that the heart is skilful, like the right hand, in the wise man, but clumsy, like the left, in the fool. NB: this does not DEFINE the wise and fool, but CHARACTERIZES them. Wise and fool have a moral basis; the facility of using the heart is more intellectual. The claim is that the wise (morally) will in general be more intelligent and more facile, while folly (wickedness) will take its toll on one's capacity for intelligent action.

5. 10:3. Wisdom > Folly.

Same idea as v.2. "His wisdom" is literally "his heart." The fool can't get his mind into gear, and the results show to all around his folly.

D. Folly in Authority, 10:4-7

1. 4, How to deal with it:

a) The problem: angry ruler.

(LH is used of wrath, 2 Sam. 11:20; 2 Chron. 36:16.

b) What not to do: walk out in a rage. NWX in second Hiphil form, cf. 7:18; 11:6 for sense "withdraw," thus "abandon." Cf. 8:3. He is still the ruler, even though he is a fool, and God will not honor us if we rebel against him.

c) What to do: MRP), healing, gentleness, cf. Prov. 12:18 (same word); "a soft answer turns away wrath," Prov. 15:1.

2. 5-7, its consequences: folly is exalted and nobility is demeaned. Foolish rulers do not recognize the true merits of those under them, and thus do not dispatch them appropriately.

E. Folly in Labor, 10:8-11

Discusses the dangers of daily work, and how the intelligent use of means can avoid them. Note the chiastic ordering of dangers and remedies.

1. Dangers:

a) 8, field work, including being bitten by a serpent.

b) 9, construction, involving cutting rock and wood.

2. Means:

a) 10, failure to sharpen the tool, thus leading to the dangers of 9.

b) 11, "If the serpent bites without the charm, then there is no advantage for the charmer." May refer to uttering a charm too late, or may just be a comment that charms are not the way to handle snakes.

3. The point is that daily life is full of dangers. The wise person will recognize these and make intelligent use of means to avoid them. Just because we are not the masters of our lives is no reason to let disaster overtake us without resistance. That is the course of the fool.

F. Folly in Speech, 10:12-15?

All but the last of these directly mention speech or words, and even that implies it. What characterizes the speech of the fool?

1. 12, Malice. The wise man's words are gracious and kind, even when he has something unpleasant to say. (Distinguish form and content.) Cf. Paul always starting with positive. The fool's words are so harsh that they even consume himself.
2. 13, Nonsense, madness. He babbles on about foolish things. The scholarly world to the contrary, Not all things are worth talking about. Eph. 5:12.
3. 14, Abundance. The fool is always ready to talk, even about themes of which no one knows anything. cf. 5:2. Loquaciousness is not a godly trait.
4. 15, Annoying. Here we see the fool, trying to find his way to the city. The road to the city is always the biggest, the best marked, the best known, but he can't find it, and wears everybody out asking them for it.

G. Summary

Though Qohelet has warned us that wisdom can't guarantee happiness or success, still it is better than the alternative. To help us keep wisdom in perspective, he has

1. *told* us a story about what wisdom can and can't do, showing that wisdom is the best tool for dealing with the world, but that the wise man may not always get the credit he deserves;
2. *compared* wisdom and folly, showing that while wisdom is stronger than folly in solving problems, folly is stronger than wisdom in that it can swamp out the effects of wisdom;
3. *outlined* the effects of folly in three spheres: leadership, labor, and speech.

We should strive to exhibit wisdom in our daily lives.