

Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament

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Chapter 10

A Final Reflection about Folly

In **conclusion**, the Preacher **determines to fear God, obey God, and enjoy life**
(9:1–12:14)

Having discoursed on **the nature and examples of wisdom (9:10–18)**, Solomon turns to **its opposite, foolishness in chapter 10**. The first verse of the chapter picks up where chapter 9 leaves off—with a **comparative statement regarding wisdom and foolishness**. In **9:18** he uses the “better than” type of proverbial statement to bring out the contrast between the success of wisdom and the destruction of good by foolishness. In **10:1**, an illustrative proverb depicts dead flies corrupting the perfumer’s oil. In general, chapter 10 reveals that the wisdom literature topic of the *two ways* (e.g., Psalm 1 contrasts the way of the righteous with the way of the wicked) applies to nations as much as to individuals.¹

Recognizing Fools (10:1–4)

Whereas 9:18 refers to a community situation in which one sinner destroys what is good, 10:1 looks only at an individual situation.² The phrase “**dead flies**” could mean “deadly flies.” However, the proverb does not focus on their deadliness, but on their effect on the perfumed oil.³ Since that is the obvious intent of the author, it means “dead flies.”⁴ Flies were persistent pests in the ancient Near East. Landing on the surface of perfumed oil might result in their entanglement and death. The dead flies would spoil the oil.⁵ The literally reads, “**makes stink makes bubble up**” or “**causes stench pours**

¹ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 327.

² Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 133.

³ *Ibid.*, 133 footnote 1.

⁴ Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, Word Biblical Commentary 23A (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 97.

⁵ George Aaron Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, International Critical Commentary (1908; reprint, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1971), 166.

forth.⁶ That is, when someone opens the bottle of perfumed oil, the foul smell pours out of it, overwhelming the senses. Since ancient peoples used such oils to disguise the smell of decaying bodies (cp. 2 Chron 16:14), the picture here might be that **the oil itself exudes a fouler stench than even a decaying corpse.**⁷

The fool's "small mistake makes the smell of his folly greater than the fragrance of his wisdom."⁸ The truth thus conveyed is that **a little thing can bring about unacceptable results.** Other ways to express the proverb include: "an ounce of folly can destroy a ton of wisdom";⁹ "it takes far less to ruin something than to create it";¹⁰ "it is easier to make a stink than to create sweetness";¹¹ or, "wisdom is acquired at great expense . . . but stupidity comes easy."¹²

Yet another contrasting proverb opposes wisdom and foolishness (v. 2). Literally, the verse reads, "A wise man's heart is at his right hand and a fool's heart is at his left hand." Translators handle the text in a variety of ways in the English versions, but all of them furnish the same basic concept: **the wise person tends to or goes to the "right," but the fool to the opposite.** The "right" speaks of the correct route—a road to favor, while the "left" speaks of the path of error—a road to disfavor and rejection (v. 2; cp. Gen 48:13–14; Matt 25:32–34). Note that the text **does not speak of the feet and walking, but of the heart and its inclination.** The heart represents the inner person. The wise person possesses a mind attuned to the eternity that God has placed within it (3:11). The foolish person, however, yields to the evil within (cp. 8:11 and 9:3). The axiom approximates that in 2:14a ("The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness").

People can discern what sort of person someone is just by watching him walk along a road (v. 3). "His sense is lacking"—in other words, a fool exhibits an inner deficiency through his or her behavior (cp. Prov 12:23; 13:16). The fool speaks loudly, behaves arrogantly, ignores the rights and needs of others, and rebels against spiritual things.¹³ Solomon had learned to discern the nature of people by how they spoke and behaved.

"Ruler" (moshel) in verse 4 can include multiple levels of officials (cf. 2 Chron 23:20; Eccl 9:17; Jer 51:46).¹⁴ Solomon advises **remaining calm** and collected even when a government leader expresses or displays anger (cp. 9:17), because a calm response prevents unwise words or actions (cp. Prov 15:1; 16:14; 25:15). **"Do not abandon"** represents the first of only three direct instructions in chapter 10 (cf. v. 20). Kidner applies the proverb to "the huff." He suggests avoiding self-inflicted damage, "for

⁶ The second verb could mean "ferment"; Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 238.

⁷ Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 194.

⁸ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 133.

⁹ Adapted from Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 100.

¹⁰ Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance: Ecclesiastes & the Way of the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 88.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Michael Kelley, *The Burden of God: Studies in Wisdom and Civilization from the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Minneapolis, MN: Contra Mundum Books, 1993), 135.

¹³ Cf. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 134.

¹⁴ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 101.

while it may feel magnificent to ‘resign your post’ (NEB), ostensibly on principle but actually in a fit of pride, it is in fact less impressive, more immature, than it feels.”¹⁵ The circumstances in verse 4 differ from those in 8:3, so the advice varies accordingly.

An Upside-Down World (10:5–7)

The only remaining occurrence of “I have seen” in the book comes in this same section (10:7).¹⁶ These two references bracket verses 5–7. The “**evil**” (cp. 5:13; 6:1) that Solomon has seen “under the sun” refers to something that is not good—it is improper, disruptive, unjust, or even harmful. This particular impropriety occurs **within the realm of government**. A comparative sense (“like an error”) seems not to fit the context well. Therefore, some versions render the phrase “as it were” (RSV, ESV) or even omitting any form of “as” or “like” (HCSB, “There is an evil I have seen under the sun, even an error . . .”). “**Error**” refers to a “thoughtless, culpable sort of mistake.”¹⁷ An administrative oversight results in placing exceedingly inept people in positions of high responsibility and power.

The “**ruler**” (*shalit*) does not specifically designate a king any more than the word *moshel* in verse 4. Interestingly, Moses employs both words to describe Joseph’s role in Egypt (Gen 42:6, *shalit*; 45:8, *moshel*). The individual can be anyone in government leadership who is subordinate to the king (or pharaoh).

Verse 6 specifies the particular governmental situation or circumstance. **Too many fools sit in places of leadership**, while “rich men sit in humble places” (v. 6). Equally topsy-turvy are those governments in which slaves move around on horseback and princes walk like slaves (v. 7). In the cultural environment of ancient Israel, the common citizen did not own a horse. **Royalty, nobility, and the military used equestrian transport** (1 Kgs 5:6).¹⁸ Proverbs 19:10 addresses just such a topsy-turvy situation: “Luxury is not fitting for a fool; much less for a slave to rule over princes” (cp. Prov 30:21–23). Such conditions in government illustrate the reality of the uncertain aspect of life: “**things do not turn out the way one expects**”—**even if wisdom is present.**¹⁹ Political realities are often tangled. No one knows when one official will fall from favor and another, very different individual, will rise to power.

Comparing Solomon’s observations (vv. 5–7) with **Hannah’s song (1 Sam 2:7–8)** demonstrates that wisdom instruction in proverbs refer to general truths that might not apply in every situation. Solomon himself speaks of circumstances in which he prefers a wise young king to a foolish old king (**4:13–16**). The elevation of a slave or a poor man to a position of political power can also testify “to the power of God’s ‘revolutionary’ ways.”²⁰ Citizens cannot know whether God has purposefully produced the reversal of political roles. The sinfulness of man might have brought about the situation, but it might also be the result of God’s guiding hand. Note that Solomon does not advocate instigating a counter-revolution. Instead, **he instructs the godly citizen to:**

¹⁵ Kidner, *A Time to Mourn*, 89–90.

¹⁶ See 1:14; 2:13, 24; 3:10, 16, 22; 4:1, 4, 7, 15; 5:13, 18; 6:1; 7:15; 8:9, 10, 17; 9:11, 13.

¹⁷ Daniel C. Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs*, by Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16 (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2010), 221.

¹⁸ C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 315.

¹⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 101.

²⁰ William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000), 99.

- 1) continue on as before without leaving any governmental position (v. 4),
- 2) be an observer like Solomon himself (vv. 5, 7),
- 3) behave wisely, taking proper precautions even for daily labors (vv. 8–10),
- 4) speak with grace and avoid loquaciousness (vv. 12–14),
- 5) remember that the future cannot be known (v. 14),
- 6) be diligent, not lazy (v. 18),
- 7) pay attention to the normal enjoyments and necessities of life (v. 19), and
- 8) do not speak disrespectfully of those in authority (v. 20).

Proverbs from Everyday Life Settings (10:8–11)

Calamity awaits anyone even in common actions in everyday living. A farmer or a hunter may **dig a pit** and end up falling into it and being injured (v. 8a; cp. Pss 7:15; 9:15; Prov 26:27).²¹ A serpent might bite the workman **demolishing the wall** of a dwelling or the wall of a city (v. 8b; Amos 5:19; cp. Acts 28:4). **The quarryman** must watch that a loosened slab might not suddenly break away and fall on him (v. 9a). The woodman **splitting logs** might be harmed by a piece that flies up into his face, a log that suddenly rolls over his foot, or by the axe itself glancing off the log and striking his leg (v. 9b; cp. Deut 19:5). This last illustration might also be compounded by a dull blade (v. 10a). The axe wielder must apply more strength in order to get the dull blade to bite deep into the wood. The extra exertion might create yet another accident.

At the end of this string of common proverbs Solomon finishes with his main point: **“Wisdom has the advantage of giving success” (v. 10b)**. No matter what labor one pursues (digging a pit, demolishing a wall, quarrying stone, or splitting logs), the application of wisdom brings safety and success to the endeavor. It is as though Solomon said, “Use your head. Think about what you are doing. Proceed with proper caution and attention to potentially harmful consequences.” Danger can lurk in every area of daily life. Pragmatically speaking, these illustrations speak of proper preparation for any task. Wright adapts the truth to two modern axioms: “Sharpen your knife before carving the chicken. Or, Don’t blame the class for not listening if you haven’t sharpened your wits with proper preparation.”²² Speaking of the axiom’s relevance, Tidball writes, “People want to lead churches or evangelize the world without training first. They want to go and live overseas without learning the language. They want to get married and have a family without saving up.”²³

The final proverb moves from the realm of common chores to **the snake charmer (v. 11)**. His imminent danger seems a bit more expected—snake charmers work with poisonous serpents like cobras and adders. If the charm does not work immediately, the snake might strike the charmer (or a customer) and cause his death. Eaton notes from this proverb that “Slackness may nullify inherent skill.”²⁴

²¹ Many of the biblical references to falling into a pit of one’s own making speak of retribution and justice (sometimes called “boomerang justice”). However, this verse deals with accidents.

²² J. Stafford Wright, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 5:1186.

²³ Derek Tidball, *That’s Just the Way It Is: A Realistic View of Life from the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Geanies House, UK: Christian Focus, 1998), 169.

²⁴ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 136.

The Words and Work of a Fool (10:12–15)

All biblical wisdom literature eventually gets around to the topic of speech (often using the figures of mouth, tongue, and/or lips).²⁵ Literally, **verse 12** begins, “**Words of a wise man’s mouth are grace.**” Gracious words accompany the wise (v. 12a; cp. 8:1; Prov 22:11; Ps 45:2; Luke 4:22) and such grace wins favor with the people whom a wise person encounters. Indeed, the wise individual’s words are “gracious in content, winsome in spirit, affectionate in appeal, and compliant and affable in tone.”²⁶ **The foolish** on the contrary, will suffer the consequences of **unwise words (v. 12b)** and only succeed in alienating others. From start to finish, the speech of a fool displays a lack of wisdom and too **often results in “wicked madness” (v. 13)**. In spite of the dangers he faces, however, the fool **just keeps on talking** (“multiplies words,” v. 14a). The implied lesson is that everyone must take heed to the words they speak, for God hears and will judge each one accordingly (**Matt 12:36–37**).

Just as the proverbs of verses 8–10a conclude with a practical application, so verses 12–14a unexpectedly apply their instruction to **the ignorance of mankind concerning what will happen in the future (v. 14b; cp. 3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 8:7)**. According to Kaiser, the fool’s “unbelief and failure to consider that there is a future judgment, wherein the totality of life will be reviewed, puts him at such a huge disadvantage compared to the devout, wise man that he is to be pitied.”²⁷

The closing instruction indicates the futility of a fool’s labor—he becomes so exhausted that he cannot figure out how to go into a nearby city (v. 15). **Incompetence arises out of the failure to apply due diligence in the realm of labor and work.** Eaton describes the circumstances as “a moral and intellectual laziness which leads to a stumbling (2:14), fumbling (10:2), crumbling (10:18) life.”²⁸ Kidner explains that the fool “would get lost, we might say today, even if you put him on an escalator.”²⁹ Whatever the original meaning of this proverb, one thing is clear: the fool often cannot accomplish the most intuitive of tasks or make the simplest decisions. He (or she) just “makes things needlessly difficult for himself by his stupidity.”³⁰ An English saying fits the fool well here: “He does not know enough to come in out of the rain.”

Due Diligence (10:16–20)

Turning to the status of a nation, Solomon introduces **a woe-oracle (v. 16) and a declaration of blessing (v. 17)**. Thus the text describes **two different national destinies: disaster or security.**³¹ In a context dealing with wisdom, Solomon reveals that **wise people truly care about how leaders govern their home country**. It is the fool who does not care and who isolates himself or herself from how a government conducts its business and from those who lead it “in a world which is at once demanding (18),

²⁵ Cp. Job 8:2; 15:5; 16:5; 20:12; 35:16; Pss 5:9; 10:7; 19:14; 49:3; 73:9; Prov 4:24; 6:2; 8:13; 10:6, 32; 14:3; 15:2; 16:23; 18:6; 21:23; 26:7, 28; Eccl 5:2, 5; James 3.

²⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 110.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 136.

²⁹ Kidner, *A Time to Mourn*, 92–93.

³⁰ Ibid., 93.

³¹ Cp. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 137.

delightful (19) and dangerous (20).”³² A nation with a young and inexperienced king and profligate leaders is doomed (cf. Isa 5:11, 22–23; Prov 31:4–5). Security will be lax and the business of the nation will suffer from lack of mature and serious judgment (v. 16).

Blessing, however, awaits the land with an experienced king who comes from a noble heritage and who works together with officials not given to gluttony and drunkenness (v. 17). **Good national leaders exhibit a personal independence, maturity, wisdom, and self-control.**³³ Selfish, arrogant, and pleasure-seeking leaders bring trouble to any nation. In **Isaiah 3:1–5** the Lord announces that He will judge His people in Jerusalem and Judah by removing the mature, the experienced, the noble, and the influential and replace them in leadership with “mere lads” and “capricious children” who will bring in an oppressive government. Such a situation brings to mind the astoundingly pettiness and ignorance of **Rehoboam** as he rejected the counsel of his wiser elders and listened instead to the unwise council of rash young men in **1 Kings 12:10–12**. *Ecclesiastes* 10 is on the verge of becoming a rude reality in Solomon’s kingdom. Perhaps with his powers of keen observation he sees the trouble brewing already and with his God-given wisdom discerns what will happen when his son inherits the throne. **Second Chronicles 13:7** refers to Rehoboam being “young and timid and could not hold his own against” his worthless companions. “Young” here is relative, since he was 41 years of age when he became king (**1 Kgs 14:21**).

What takes place within a nation might also take place within each citizen’s home. **The lazy home owner will soon find himself living in a home on the verge of collapse—literally (v. 18).** The roof sags precariously and the rain sprouts innumerable leaks. Ancient roofs were flat and sealed with lime, “which eventually cracked and allowed rain to seep in (cf. Prov 19:13; 27:15).”³⁴ In Eaton’s words, “If attention is not paid to the everyday details of life, the results become a crippling liability.”³⁵ The proverb should be interpreted literally and applied liberally—it speaks in itself of a man’s need to maintain his home, but **within this context that same axiomatic truth applies to the government of a nation** just as accurately.³⁶ In government, Fredericks observes, “self-indulgent sluggards will only procrastinate the routine decisions necessary for the daily administration . . . This indolence is the opposite of the urgency of the biblical work ethic.”³⁷

The opposite of laziness is diligence. **The lazy will suffer loss, but the diligent will enjoy the fruits of their labors. They enjoy food enough, drink enough, and money enough to take care of every need (v. 19).** This positive interpretation of the verse depends upon associating it with the appropriate behavior of wise rulers in verse 17, rather than connecting it with the irresponsible feasting of foolish officials in verse 16.³⁸

According to Garrett, “The point is that at least some money is essential for enjoying life, and steps must therefore be taken to insure that the economy (be it national

³² Kidner, *A Time to Mourn*, 94.

³³ Cp. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 137.

³⁴ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 105.

³⁵ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 137.

³⁶ Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 367.

³⁷ Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” 225. See Eccl 9:10; Prov 10:4; 18:9; 20:4; and 28:2.

³⁸ Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books*, 368.

or personal) is sound.”³⁹ Solomon already addressed the positive value of money or wealth in 2:26; 5:19; and 7:11–12.

Lastly, Solomon returns to private speech and rumors to warn against speaking unwisely about the king (v. 20; cp. 7:21–22). Cursing a ruler comprises a violation of the Mosaic law (**Exod 22:28**). Paul instructed Timothy to pray for “kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity” (**1 Tim 2:1–2**). “Cursing political leaders is wrong in itself,” Within the royal household few words can be spoken without someone overhearing them (see 2 Kgs 6:12)—even **the walls of one’s bedroom have ears**. Using a bird as the illustration implies the speed with which idle words can make their way to the ears of the slandered person.

Verse 20 closes the chapter by twice giving an instruction to not speak a curse even within the quiet seclusion of one’s bedroom. When compared with the proverb of 9:17, there is a measure of irony that, having given positive significance to a failure to listen to quiet words *publicly* spoken at the end of chapter 9, Solomon ends chapter 10 with a warning about the certainty of hearing quiet words *privately* spoken. Eaton concludes that **“The verse challenges us to remain calm in days of national sloth, immaturity and indulgence, and calls for a submissive approach to authority**, giving an expedient reason for obedience.”⁴⁰ It really is a matter of patriotic respect for governmental leaders. In his book, *Politics According to the Bible*, Wayne Grudem reminds his readers that “The Bible teaches Christians to **obey and honor the leaders of the nation** in which they live.”⁴¹ He identifies this instruction in both the New Testament (Rom 13:1–7; 1 Pet 2:13–17) and the Old (Prov 24:21; Eccl 10:20; Jer 29:4–7).⁴²

Three kinds of animals mentioned in 10:1–20 will help us remember the message of the passage. **The diminutive size and seeming insignificance of flies, snakes, and birds conceal the great potential for harm that they possess.**⁴³ The flies, after all, were “flies of death” (or, “deadly flies”; v. 1). The serpent’s bite can also be deadly (vv. 8, 11) and the little bird carrying one’s words to the king can bring dire consequences (v. 20). Bird flu epidemics have cost the lives of thousands of people even in the modern era of scientific medicine—evidence that small animals bring enormous consequences. If nothing else, this chapter teaches us to pay proper attention to the so-called “little things” in life both personally and nationally. Everything a person does matters. The character of a government leader matters. Even a little word can have far-reaching effects.

Questions for study:

- What little things in life possess the potential to bring substantial harm upon an individual?
- What seemingly insignificant factors have the potential to bring about serious consequences for a nation?
- How can we identify a biblical fool?

³⁹ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary 14 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 336–37.

⁴⁰ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 138.

⁴¹ Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in the Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 110.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 110–11.

⁴³ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 258.

- Identify some of the preparations necessary for a wise and secure life on a daily basis.
- What are the qualities of a good national leader?